SIXTH EDITION

THE FILM EXPERIENCE

an introduction

macmillan learning™

Timothy Corrigan • Patricia White

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an introduction

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Description

The front cover shows the name of the book, the edition, and the logo of Macmillan Learning at the top. Below, the cover photo shows the back view of a man standing at a doorway. In-built shelves on either side and above the door display a range of glasses and crockery. The authors' names are printed below the cover photo.

Bring your film experiences to life.

From IMAX-sized screens to streaming on tablets, there are more ways than ever to experience movies. *The Film Experience* is the perfect guide to understanding the full scope of this versatile, evolving medium. No matter how you watch them, *The Film Experience* will change the way you look at movies.

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LaunchPad Puts *The Film Experience* in Motion

LaunchPad is an online platform that contains

- the full e-book of *The Film Experience*, Sixth Edition, plus additional e-readings that go beyond the print text
- new LearningCurve adaptive quizzing for each chapter, which helps students practice and master key concepts
- a wealth of clips from new and classic films, each accompanied by thought-provoking questions from the book authors

TECHNOLOGY IN ACTION

The Changing Technologies of Film Promotion

A Closer Look at Technology and Animation in Film

The new Technology in Action feature discusses an aspect of film technology related to each chapter's topic (like cinematography or film sound). These illustrated features give students a better picture of cinema's past, present, and future and help them understand how changes in technology have impacted film form and film culture.

Additionally, Chapter 9 has been reorganized and revitalized as "Animation and Experimental Media: Challenging Form." This revised chapter supplements the existing coverage of experimental and avant-garde film with new coverage of animation, from early experiments to Japanese anime to the diversity of animation on our screens today. The chapter complements the sixth edition's renewed focus on technology by exploring the technological, as well as formal and artistic, aspects of animated and experimental film.

Description

The inside front cover shows three movie stills along with a text in the top portion.

The heading reads, “Bring your film experiences to life.” The first movie still shows a man in uniform, along with a teenager in a forest. The man wears the Nazi symbol on his uniform. The second movie still shows a man walking down a narrow street with buildings on either side. The third movie still shows a young woman standing on a small hill on a sunny day. The accompanying text reads, “From I MAX-sized screens to streaming on tablets, there are more ways than ever to experience movies. The Film Experience is the perfect guide to understanding the full scope of this versatile, evolving medium. No matter how you watch them, The Film Experience will change the way you look at movies.” The image credits read, “Copyright 2019 C J E N M Corporation, Barunson E and A All Rights Reserved.”

Text alongside the logo of LaunchPad reads as follows. LaunchPad Puts The Film Experience in Motion

LaunchPad is an online platform that contains

(An e-book symbol) the full e-book of The Film Experience, Sixth Edition, plus additional e-readings that go beyond the print text

(A checkbox; checked) new LearningCurve adaptive quizzing for each chapter, which helps students practice and master key concepts

(A play button) a wealth of clips from new and classic films, each accompanied by thought-provoking questions from the book authors.

The bottom portion shows a screenshot of a page titled, “Technology in Action.” The text reads as follows. The Changing Technologies of Film Promotion

The history of cinema is, in part, a history of changing technologies, and the art and business of film promotion and marketing have continually changed over time along with those technologies. In the first decades of the twentieth century, the movies moved rapidly from a vaudevillian

novelty to an important institution within the cultural mainstream. Supporting this cultural shift, traditional print media (including newspapers, posters, and fan magazines) began to celebrate new films and stars as a part of a new and exciting literacy, a way of seeing the world in tune with the energies of the emerging twentieth century. Photoplay magazine appeared in 1911, just as the Hollywood star system was beginning to emerge as a major promotional strategy. This magazine attracted passionate readers and moviegoers to stories about upcoming films and about the public and private lives of directors and actors. Such publications broadened the reach of film promotion to the growing middle class and assimilated the new film arts into literary and journalistic media, bridging a cultural past and a cultural present [Figure 1.21a]. Figure 1.21a shows a cover page of Photoplay magazine. The caption reads, Photoplay magazine cover (February 1931). Magazines and newspapers welcomed the new art of cinema through traditional journalistic vehicles. Transcendental Graphics/Archive Photos/Getty Images.

As promotional technologies expanded through the mid-twentieth century to include radio and television, film studios immediately took advantage of the broad markets reached by these outlets. As audio and visual media, radio and television allowed potential audiences to see and hear the actors, music, and images being promoted in advance of the films themselves. For instance, a ninety-second radio ad for Superman the Movie (1978) alternated between voiceover narration quoting the praise of critics (“a super hit!”), the film’s musical score, and pieces of lively dialogue (“the problem with men of steel is that there’s never one around when you want one”). Both radio and television became ubiquitous promotional vehicles that integrate sound and (in the case of television ads) images to draw viewers into theaters [Figure 1.21b]. Figure 1.21b shows a photo of Joan Collins, and the caption reads, “Television promotion (1960). Television and radio made stars like Joan Collins (pictured here) come alive as a new form of promotion. C B S Photo Archive/C B S/Getty Images.”

More recently, the internet brought another major technological change in film promotion. Today, many marketing campaigns encourage interactivity and direct involvement from potential viewers, teasing mysteries and unexpected surprises intended to boost word of-mouth engagement. The pioneering example of internet marketing was The Blair Witch Project (1999), a low-budget horror film that generated excitement through an immersive viral campaign. Over several months prior to its release, the film's distributors released realistic "newsreel" footage online that made the plot of the film seem believable, to the point where potential viewers actually debated whether the film was fiction or documentary. Due to its commercial and critical success, The Blair Witch Project has become a model for subsequent viral marketing campaigns, illustrating the extent to which promotional technologies impact our film experience [Figure 1.21c]. Figure 1.21c shows a poster for missing people, and the caption reads, "The Blair Witch Project (1999). Today the internet often makes promotion part of an interactive engagement with viewers. William Thomas Cain/Hulton Archive/Getty Images."

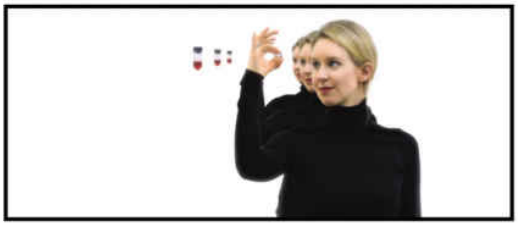
New Visuals and Examples Throughout the Book

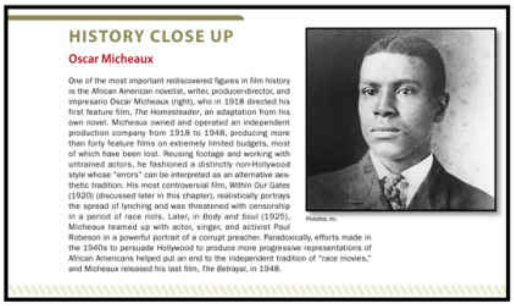
With hundreds of images, *The Film Experience* visually reinforces all the major techniques, concepts, and film traditions discussed in the text with eye-catching examples. New part-opening and chapter-opening images cover films from cinema's early years to today. Contemporary additions include *Bohemian Rhapsody*, *Dunkirk*, *Free Solo*, *Jojo Rabbit*, *Little Women*, *Parasite*, *Roma*, and *Us* alongside classics like *Touch of Evil*, *Midnight Cowboy*, *The Shining*, *In the Mood for Love*, and many more.

Proven Learning Tools That Foster Critical Viewing and Analysis

The Film Experience offers a great array of learning tools that have been updated for this edition, including

- new Viewing Cues in every chapter
- in-depth Film in Focus essays, including new ones on films like *A Quiet Place* and *Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse*
- History Close Up boxes that advance a conversation about how film history interacts with contemporary film culture
- the most in-depth coverage of writing about film in any introductory film textbook





Description

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cover films from cinema's early years to today. Contemporary additions include Bohemian Rhapsody, Dunkirk, Free Solo, Jojo Rabbit, Little Women, Parasite, Roma, and Us alongside classics like Touch of Evil, Midnight Cowboy, The Shining, In the Mood for Love, and many more.

Chapter 1

Encountering Film

From Preproduction to Exhibition

Between 2013 and 2018, Ryan Coogler directed three very different films: Fruitvale Station (2013), Creed (2015), and Black Panther (2018). Although all three feature Michael B. Jordan and share important questions about racial identity and cultural violence, the production, distribution, and exhibition of the three films illustrate how films, even by the same director, can be shaped by extremely different institutional histories that in turn shape our understanding of them.

Based on actual events that occurred in 2008 in California, Fruitvale Station is a small but intense drama about an African American man mistakenly shot and killed by a transit policeman. When the film's theatrical release in July 2013 coincided with the acquittal of the police officer who killed a young, unarmed African American man in Florida, Fruitvale Station became part of larger conversations, still ongoing, about justice in the streets of America.

Creed traveled a different path. This franchise film inherited the whole history of the Rocky series, which focused on star Sylvester Stallone's character as a working-class boxer. In Creed, Rocky, an older and wiser man, trains the son of his old rival. A more formulaic film than Fruitvale Station, it appealed to both African American and broader audiences and became a box-office success.

Finally, as part of the popular Marvel Cinematic Universe film series, Black Panther ramped up its production values and its financial and cultural success. The film — about superhero T'Challa's fight to save the fictional African nation of Wakanda — won three Academy Awards and grossed over $1.3 billion worldwide, becoming the highest-grossing movie in history with a black director and a majority-black cast.

As these three disparate films suggest, film production, distribution, and exhibition shape our encounters with movies, and these aspects of film are in turn shaped by how movies are received by audiences.

Proven Learning Tools That Foster Critical Viewing and Analysis

The Film Experience offers a great array of learning tools that have been updated for this edition, including

new Viewing Cues in every chapter

in-depth Film in Focus essays, including new ones on films like A Quiet Place and Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse

History Close Up boxes that advance a conversation about how film history interacts with contemporary film culture

the most in-depth coverage of writing about film in any introductory film textbook

History Close Up

Oscar Micheaux

One of the most important rediscovered figures in film history is the African American novelist, writer, producer-director, and impresario Oscar Micheaux (right), who in 1918 directed his first feature film, The Homesteader, an adaptation from his own novel. Micheaux owned and operated an independent production company from 1918 to 1948,

producing more than forty feature films on extremely limited budgets, most of which have been lost. Reusing footage and working with untrained actors, he fashioned a distinctly non-Hollywood style whose “errors” can be interpreted as an alternative aesthetic tradition. His most controversial film, Within Our Gates (1920) (discussed later in this chapter), realistically portrays the spread of lynching and was threatened with censorship in a period of race riots. Later, in Body and Soul (1925), Micheaux teamed up with actor, singer, and activist Paul Robeson in a powerful portrait of a corrupt preacher. Paradoxically, efforts made in the 1940s to persuade Hollywood to produce more progressive representations of African Americans helped put an end to the independent tradition of “race movies,” and Micheaux released his last film, The Betrayal, in 1948.

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THE FILM EXPERIENCE
An Introduction

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Macmillan Learning
Boston | New York

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About the Authors

Courtesy Timothy Corrigan

Timothy Corrigan is a professor emeritus of cinema and media studies at the University of Pennsylvania. His other books include *New German Film: The Displaced Image* (Indiana UP); *The Films of*

Werner Herzog: Between Mirage and History (Routledge); *Writing about Film* (Longman/Pearson); *A Cinema without Walls: Movies and Culture after Vietnam* (Routledge/Rutgers UP); *Film and Literature: An Introduction and Reader* (Routledge); *Critical Visions in Film Theory: Classical and Contemporary Readings* (Bedford/St. Martin's), with Patricia White and Meta Mazaj; *American Cinema of the 2000s* (Rutgers UP); *Essays on the Essay Film* (Columbia UP), with Nora M. Alter; and *The Essay Film: From Montaigne, After Marker* (Oxford UP), winner of the 2012 Katherine Singer Kovács Award for the outstanding book in film and media studies. He has published essays in *Film Quarterly, Discourse* , and *Cinema Journal*, among other collections, and is also an editor of the journal *Adaptation* and a former editorial board member of *Cinema Journal*. In 2014, he received the Society for Cinema and Media Studies Award for Outstanding Pedagogical Achievement.

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Camera Obscura, Cinema Journal, Film Quarterly , and *Screen*, and in books including *A Feminist Reader in Early Cinema, Out in Culture* , and *The Routledge Companion to Cinema and Gender*. She is coeditor with Timothy Corrigan and Meta Mazaj of *Critical Visions in Film Theory: Classic and Contemporary Readings* (Bedford/St. Martin's). She is a member of the editorial collective of the feminist film journal *Camera Obscura*. She serves on the board of the feminist distributor and media organization Women Make Movies and the editorial board of *Film Quarterly*.

Preface

In our culture, movies have become a near-universal experience, even as their delivery methods have expanded and changed. Whether watching the newest *Star Wars* adventure with a packed crowd, viewing Academy Award–winner *Parasite* (2019), or catching up with classics or old favorites in our homes, we all have experienced the pleasures that movies can bring. The film experience can begin with journeying to imaginary worlds, witnessing recreations of history, observing stars in familiar and unfamiliar roles, and exploring the laughter, thrills, or emotions of different genres. Understanding the full depth and variety of these experiences, though, requires more than just initial impressions.

This book aims to help students learn the languages of film and synthesize those languages into a cohesive knowledge of the medium that will, in turn, enhance their movie watching. *The Film Experience: An Introduction* offers readers a serious, comprehensive introduction to the art, industry, culture, and *experience* of movies — along with digital tools to bring that experience to life and help students master course material.

As movie fans ourselves, we believe that the complete film experience comes from understanding both the formal and cultural aspects of cinema. Knowing how filmmakers use the familiarity of star personas, for example, can be as valuable and enriching as

understanding how a particular editing rhythm creates a specific mood. *The Film Experience* builds on formal knowledge and cultural contexts to ensure that students gain a well-rounded ability to engage in critical analysis. The sixth edition is better equipped than ever to meet this challenge with a renewed focus on the changing technologies of film, including an extensively revised chapter on animated and experimental media (Chapter 9), a new Technology in Action feature that helps students understand how technology has influenced film form and film culture, and better-than-ever digital support in LaunchPad, our online course platform (learn more at **launchpadworks.com**). LaunchPad for *The Film Experience* now includes the full e-book, new video clips with discussion questions that bring cinematic concepts to life, and LearningCurve adaptive quizzing to help students practice and master key concepts from the book. The learning tools we have created help students make the transition from movie fan to critical viewer, allowing them to use the knowledge they acquire in this course to enrich their movie-watching experiences throughout their lives.

The Best Coverage of Film's Formal Elements

We believe that comprehensive knowledge of film practices and techniques allows students a deeper and more nuanced understanding of film meaning. Going beyond mere descriptions of the nuts and bolts of film form, *The Film Experience* highlights how formal elements like cinematography, editing, and sound can be analyzed and interpreted within the context of a film as a whole — formal studies made even more vivid by our suite of film clips in LaunchPad.

In choosing our text and video examples, we draw from the widest variety of movies in any introductory text, demonstrating how individual formal elements can contribute to a film's larger meaning. We understand the importance of connecting with students through films they may already know, and we have added new examples referring to recent films like *Jojo Rabbit* (2019), *Little Women* (2019), *Parasite* (2019), *A Quiet Place* (2018), *Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse* (2018), *Star Wars: Episode IX — The Rise of Skywalker* (2019), and *Us* (2019). We also feel that it is our responsibility to help students understand the rich variety of movies throughout history, utilizing classics like *The Jazz Singer* (1927), *Citizen Kane* (1941), *Touch of Evil* (1958), *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967), and *The Godfather* (1972), as well as a wealth of experimental, independent, and international films.

Fully Encapsulating the Culture of Film

In addition to a strong foundation in film form, knowledge of the nature and extent of film culture and its impact on our viewing experiences is necessary for a truly holistic understanding of cinema. One of the pillars of *The Film Experience* story has always been its focus on the relationship among viewers, movies, and the industry. Throughout, the book explores how these connections are shaped by the social, cultural, and economic contexts of films through incisive discussions of such topics as the influence of the star system, the marketing strategies of indies versus blockbusters, and the multitude of reasons that we are drawn to some films over others. That discussion continues in this new edition with additional emphasis on how the medium's history informs the ways we watch movies today.

New to This Edition

In response to reviewer feedback, we have overhauled *The Film Experience*'s coverage of technology and animation. As ever, *The Film Experience* is the best textbook at representing today's film culture — and in this edition, we have renewed our focus on technology. With an extensively revised Chapter 9 and a new Technology in Action feature in every chapter, we show how changes in technology have influenced film form and film culture. Additionally, this edition of *The Film Experience* can be packaged with LaunchPad, which for the first time contains the full e-book and LearningCurve adaptive quizzing.

Technology in Action Places Current Trends in Historical Context

Every chapter now includes a full-page Technology in Action feature — some of which are supplemented by video activities in LaunchPad — and each explores how technology in a certain area, like cinematography or film sound, has changed over time. Today, technological changes in film are rapid and far-reaching. Over the last two decades, video stores have gone from a major segment of the industry to virtually nonexistent, while in-home streaming services like Netflix and Amazon Prime Video have emerged as the most common way that many of us experience film. Other changes, like theaters' transition to digital projection and the resurgence of

3D film, are equally impactful. The Technology in Action feature helps students understand these and other changes in a historical context, revealing that film technology has *always* been evolving and that these changes have always affected the culture, exhibition, and experience of film.

A Heavily Revised Chapter 9 on Animation and Experimental Media

Our pre-revision reviewers requested more coverage of animated film, and we have provided it in this revised chapter. Chapter 9 now covers the history, form, technologies, and theory of both animated and experimental film, providing an integrated look at these topics.

LaunchPad for *The Film Experience*

The Film Experience goes further with LaunchPad, our online platform. LaunchPad contains

the full e-book of *The Film Experience*, Sixth Edition, plus additional e-readings that go beyond the print text

LearningCurve adaptive quizzing, which helps students practice and master key concepts in each chapter of the book

numerous movie clips, video essays, discussion questions, and more — perfect for interactive learning

Bringing print and digital together, the Viewing Cue feature in the margins of each chapter directs students to clips of both classic and contemporary films available online in LaunchPad. A dozen new clips have been added for the sixth edition, all accompanied by thought-provoking discussion questions.

LaunchPad also includes many additional Film in Focus features not available in the print book. The LaunchPad platform makes it easy to assign readings from the e-book, videos, and LearningCurve activities. Access to LaunchPad for *The Film Experience* can be packaged with the book or purchased on its own. Learn more at **launchpadworks.com**.

New Examples Enhance the Strongest Art Program Available

Each generation of students that takes the introductory course (from eighteen-year-old first-year students to returning adults) is familiar with its own recent history of the movies. Hence, we have updated this edition with a number of new examples that reflect the diverse student body — Hollywood blockbusters such as *Avengers: Endgame* (2019), *Ready Player One* (2018), and *Star Wars: Episode IX — The Rise of Skywalker* (2019); independent fare like *Booksmart* (2019) and *The*

Dead Don't Die (2019); and international films like *Honeyland* (2019), *Pain and Glory* (2019), and *Parasite* (2019).

Proven Learning Tools Foster Critical Viewing and Analysis

The Film Experience transforms students from movie buffs to critical viewers by giving them the help they need to translate their movie experiences into theoretical knowledge and analytical insight. Our host of learning tools includes the following:

- **Chapter-opening vignettes place students inside a film.** Each compelling vignette, many of them new to this edition, draws from actual scenes in a real movie to connect what students know as movie fans to key ideas in the chapter's discussion. For example, Chapter 1 opens with a contrast between filmmaker Ryan Coogler's projects *Fruitvale Station* (2013), *Creed* (2015), and *Black Panther* (2018), illustrating the different scopes, scales, and frames of reference for contemporary filmmaking.
- **Film in Focus essays in each chapter provide close analyses of specific films**, demonstrating how particular techniques or concepts inform and enrich those films. For example, a new feature in Chapter 6 analyzes how sound — its use and its absence — in *A Quiet Place* (2018) creates emotional and visceral effects.
- **A focus on history, including History Close Up boxes**, shows students how film history interacts with contemporary film culture. *The Film Experience* continues to provide better and more inclusive coverage of history than any other introductory film textbook, with a particular emphasis on spotlighting the

achievements of historically marginalized groups, such as women and people of color.

- **Viewing Cues adjacent to key discussions in the chapter** highlight key concepts and prompt students to consider these concepts while viewing films on their own or in class — and to visit LaunchPad for specific video clips with questions.
- **The best instruction on writing about film and the most student writing examples** of any introductory text are offered throughout. Praised by instructors and students as a key reason they love the book, Chapter 12, "Writing a Film Essay: Observations, Arguments, Research, and Analysis," is a step-by-step guide to writing papers about film — taking notes, choosing a topic, developing an argument, incorporating film images, and completing a polished essay. It includes several annotated student essays and coverage of creating video essays, exploring a popular format for film analysis.

Resources for Instructors

To find more information on the instructor resources, please visit the online catalog at **macmillanlearning.com/filmexperience6e**. All of the resources listed below can be downloaded from the online catalog or from LaunchPad for *The Film Experience*.

- The **Online Instructor's Resource Manual** by John Bruns (College of Charleston) recommends methods for teaching the course using the chapter-opening vignettes, the Viewing Cues, and the Film in Focus and Technology in Action features. In

addition, the manual offers teaching aids like chapter overviews, questions to generate class discussion, ideas for encouraging critical and active viewing, sample test questions, and sample syllabi.

- The **Online Test Bank**, also by John Bruns (College of Charleston), includes multiple-choice, fill-in-the-blank, and short-answer questions for every chapter, except Chapter 12.
- **Lecture Slides** help instructors lead class discussions. Each chapter's slides contain the most important concepts and definitions.

Print and Digital Formats

For more information on these formats and packaging information, please visit the online catalog at **macmillanlearning.com/filmexperience6e**.

LaunchPad is a dynamic platform that enhances teaching and learning. LaunchPad for *The Film Experience* collects the full e-book, LearningCurve adaptive quizzing, videos, activities, and instructor's resources on a single site and offers a student-friendly approach, organized for easy assignability in a simple user interface. Instructors can create reading, video, or quiz assignments in seconds, as well as embed their own videos or custom content. A gradebook quickly and easily allows instructors to review the progress of the whole class, of individual students, and of individual assignments. Meanwhile, film clips with questions enhance every

chapter of the book. LaunchPad can be packaged with *The Film Experience* or purchased on its own. Learn more at **launchpadworks.com**.

***The Film Experience* is available as a print text.** To get the most out of the book and gain access to LearningCurve adaptive quizzing and our extensive video program, consider packaging LaunchPad with the print text. Use package ISBN: 978-1-319-38505-7.

The loose-leaf edition of *The Film Experience* features the same print text in a convenient, budget-priced format, designed to fit into any three-ring binder. Consider packaging LaunchPad with the loose-leaf edition. Use package ISBN: 978-1-319-38507-1.

***The Film Experience* is also available as a standalone e-book**, which includes the same content as the print book and provides an affordable option for students. For more information, visit **macmillanlearning.com/ebooks**.

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Timothy Corrigan

Patricia White

Brief Contents

Preface

PART 1 CULTURAL CONTEXTS: Watching, Studying, and Making Movies

CHAPTER 1 Encountering Film: From Preproduction to Exhibition

CHAPTER 2 History and Historiography: Hollywood and Beyond

PART 2 FORMAL COMPOSITIONS: Film Scenes, Shots, Cuts, and Sounds

CHAPTER 3 Mise-en-Scène: Exploring a Material World

CHAPTER 4 Cinematography: Framing What We See

CHAPTER 5 Editing: Relating Images

CHAPTER 6 Film Sound: Listening to the Cinema

PART 3 ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURES: From Stories to Genres

CHAPTER 7 Narrative Films: Telling Stories

CHAPTER 8 Documentary Films: Representing the Real

CHAPTER 9 Animation and Experimental Media: Challenging Form

CHAPTER 10 Movie Genres: Conventions, Formulas, and Audience Expectations

PART 4 CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES: Reading and Writing about Film

CHAPTER 11 Reading about Film: Critical Theories and Methods

CHAPTER 12 Writing a Film Essay: Observations, Arguments, Research, and Analysis

Glossary

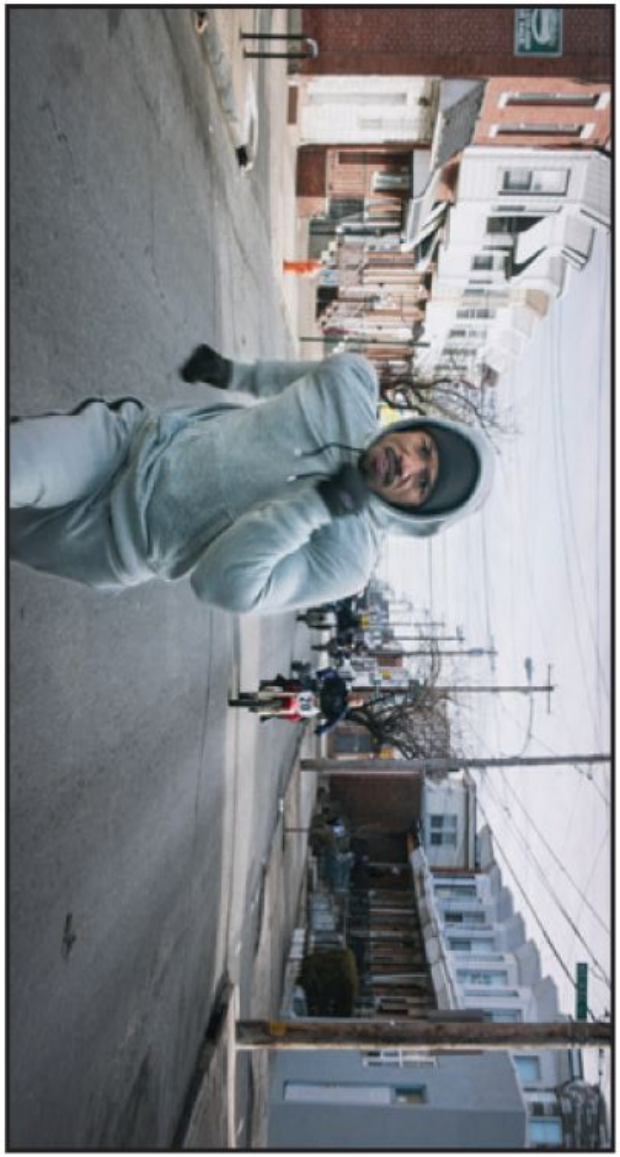
Index

The Next Level: Additional Sources

Contents

Preface

PART 1 CULTURAL CONTEXTS: watching, studying, and making movies



Middle: © Warner Bros./Courtesy Everett Collection

Description
The first still, from Fruitvale Station (2013), shows Michael B. Jordan holding a dog and looking at its eyes on the road. The second still, from Creed (2015), shows Michael B. Jordan running on the street during a fitness training session. The third still, from Black Panther (2018), shows Michael B. Jordan wearing armor along with the chief of the border tribes W'Kabi.

CHAPTER 1 Encountering Film: From Preproduction to Exhibition

- **Production: How Films Are Made**
  - Preproduction
  - Production
  - Postproduction
- **Distribution: What We Can See**
  - Distributors
  - Ancillary Markets
  - Distribution Timing
- **Marketing and Promotion: What We Want to See**
  - Generating Interest
  - **FILM IN FOCUS: Distributing *Killer of Sheep* (1977)**
  - Advertising
  - **VIEWING CUE: *Suicide Squad* (2016)**

TECHNOLOGY IN ACTION: The Changing Technologies of Film Promotion

Word of Mouth and Fan Engagement

Movie Exhibition: The Where, When, and How of Movie Experiences

The Changing Contexts and Practices of Film Exhibition

Technologies and Cultures of Exhibition

The Timing of Exhibition

FILM IN FOCUS: Exhibiting *Citizen Kane* (1941)

Chapter 1 Review

Focus Features/Everett Collection

CHAPTER 2 History and Historiography: Hollywood and Beyond

- **Silent Cinema (1895–1929)**
  - Silent Features in Hollywood
  - German Expressionist Cinema
  - Soviet Silent Films
  - French Cinema
  - **HISTORY CLOSE UP: Oscar Micheaux**
- **Classical Cinema (1929–1945)**
  - European Cinema in the 1930s and 1940s
  - Golden Age Mexican Cinema
- **Postwar Cinemas (1945–1975)**
  - Postwar Hollywood
  - International Art Cinema
  - **VIEWING CUE: *Gilda* (1946) and *Rome, Open City* (1945)**
  - **FILM IN FOCUS: *Mother India* and Postwar History (1957)**
- **Cinematic Globalization (1975–2000)**
  - New Hollywood in the Blockbuster Era
  - The Commercial Auteur
  - American Independent Cinema
  - From National to Transnational Cinema in Europe

African Cinema

Chinese Cinema

Iranian Cinema

Cinema in the Digital Era (2000–present)

Global Hollywood

Diversifying Screens

VIEWING CUE: *Beyond the Lights* (2014)

Film Culture in the Twenty-First Century

TECHNOLOGY IN ACTION: Film Preservation and Archives

FILM IN FOCUS: Rediscovering *Within Our Gates* (1920)

Chapter 2 Review

PART 2 FORMAL COMPOSITIONS: film scenes, shots, cuts, and sounds

Description
The first still shows the protagonist, Watney, standing amidst a row of cultivated potatoes inside his Mars station. The second still shows Watney in a space suit outside a Mars Ascent Vehicle (MAV). The third still shows a spaceship from above the surface of Mars.

CHAPTER 3 Mise-en-Scène: Exploring a Material World

- **A Short History of Mise-en-Scène**
  - Theatrical Mise-en-Scène and the Prehistory of Cinema
  - 1900–1912: Early Cinema's Theatrical Influences
  - 1915–1928: Silent Cinema and the Star System
  - 1930s–1960s: Studio-Era Production
  - 1940–1970: New Cinematic Realism
  - 1975–Present: Mise-en-Scène and the Blockbuster
- **The Elements of Mise-en-Scène**
  - Settings and Sets
  - Scenic Realism and Atmosphere
  - **VIEWING CUE: *Life of Pi* (2012)**
  - Props, Costumes, and Lights
  - **VIEWING CUE: *Boyhood* (2014)**
  - Performance: Actors and Stars
  - **FILM IN FOCUS: Mise-en-Scène in *Do the Right Thing* (1989)**

TECHNOLOGY IN ACTION: Scenic Lighting

Space and Design

Thinking about Mise-en-Scène

Mise-en-Scène as an External Condition or a Measure of Character

Primary Traditions for Mise-en-Scène

FILM IN FOCUS: Naturalistic Mise-en-Scène in *Bicycle Thieves* (1948)

Chapter 3 Review

Description

The first still portrays a woman standing near a young boy seated under a thatched roof on a beach.

The second still depicts the woman running up the beach to the seashore.

The third still depicts the woman and three children in swimming clothes kneeling on the beach, embracing one another. A fourth child stands behind them.

CHAPTER 4 Cinematography: Framing What We See

- **A Short History of the Cinematic Image**
  - 1820s–1880s: The Invention of Photography and the Prehistory of Cinema
  - 1890s–1920s: The Emergence and Refinement of Cinematography
  - 1930s–1940s: Developments in Color, Wide-Angle, and Small-Gauge Cinematography
  - 1950s–1960s: Widescreen, 3-D, and New Color Processes
  - 1970s–1980s: Cinematography and Exhibition in the Age of the Blockbuster
  - 1990s to the Present: The Digital Era
- **The Elements of Cinematography**
  - Point of View
  - Four Attributes of the Shot
  - **VIEWING CUE: *Touch of Evil* (1958)**

Depth of Field

TECHNOLOGY IN ACTION: Color in Film

VIEWING CUE: *Roma* (2018)

VIEWING CUE: *Fish Tank* (2009)

VIEWING CUE: *Barry Lyndon* (1975)

From Special Effects to Visual Effects

Thinking about Cinematography

The Image as Presentation and Representation

VIEWING CUE: *Vertigo* (1958)

Traditions of Images

FILM IN FOCUS: Recreating History in *Once Upon a Time … in Hollywood* (2019)

Chapter 4 Review

Description

The stills are arranged in the top to the bottom layout. The first still captures a music band, comprising of three members, midst their performance on the stage. The front man stands, in the foreground, stands with legs apart, clutching the microphone tripod with his left hand, and the other raised up to the sky. The other two members of the band, stand behind holding a guitar each. Bright red and yellow stage lights fill the stage from behind them. The second still shows three men talking beside their car parked outdoors on the roadside; the man in the middle holds a pen and paper. The third still shows the lead protagonist playing the piano and singing in a room.

CHAPTER 5 Editing: Relating Images

- **A Short History of Film Editing**
  - 1895–1918: Early Cinema and the Emergence of Editing
  - 1919–1929: Soviet Montage
  - 1930–1959: Continuity Editing in the Hollywood Studio Era
  - **HISTORY CLOSE UP: Women in the Editing Room**
  - 1960–1989: Modern Editing Styles
  - 1990s–Present: Editing in the Digital Age
- **The Elements of Editing**
  - The Cut and Other Transitions
  - **VIEWING CUE: *Chinatown* (1974)**
  - Continuity Style
  - **VIEWING CUE: *Tangerine* (2015)**

Editing and Temporality

VIEWING CUE: *The General* (1927)

Thinking about Film Editing

TECHNOLOGY IN ACTION: Editing, Then and Now

Editing as a Subjective Experience or as an Objective Perspective

FILM IN FOCUS: Patterns of Editing in *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967)

Primary Traditions in Editing Practices: Continuity, Disjunctions, and Convergences

Converging Editing Styles

Chapter 5 Review

Pictorial Press Ltd/Alamy

Description
The still shows a woman in a black dress standing on a beach beside a piano. A girl in a white dress sits on the piano.

CHAPTER 6 Film Sound: Listening to the Cinema

- **A Short History of Film Sound**
  - Prehistories of Film Sound
  - 1895–1920s: The Sounds of Silent Cinema
  - 1927–1930: Transition to Synchronized Sound
  - 1930s–1940s: Challenges and Innovations in Cinema Sound
  - 1950s–1980s: From Stereophonic to Dolby Sound
  - 1990s–Present: Sound in the Digital Era
- **The Elements of Film Sound**
  - Sound and Image
  - **TECHNOLOGY IN ACTION: Sound and Image**
  - **VIEWING CUE: *Guardians of the Galaxy* (2014)**
  - **FILM IN FOCUS: Sound and Image in *Singin' in the Rain* (1952)**
  - Sound Production
  - Voice in Film
  - Music in Film
  - Sound Effects in Film

VIEWING CUE: *The Thin Red Line* (1998)

Thinking about Film Sound

Sound Continuity and Sound Montage

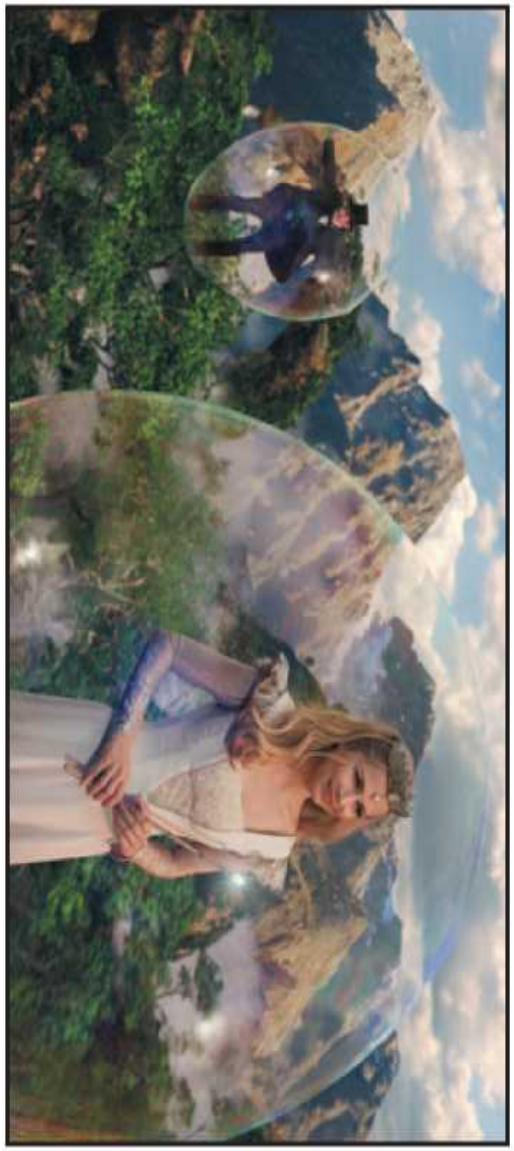
VIEWING CUE: *Winter's Bone* (2010)

Authenticity and Attention

FILM IN FOCUS: The Sound of Silence in *A Quiet Place* (2018)

Chapter 6 Review

PART 3 ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURES: from stories to genres



Top: Silver Screen Collection/Getty Images; *middle:* Michael Ochs Archives/Getty Images; *bottom:* Photo 12/Alamy

Description
The first still from the movie, The Wizard of Oz, shows the protagonist Dorothy walking through a meadow on a yellow brick road along with the Tin Man, the Scarecrow, the Cowardly Lion. The second still shows the same characters as portrayed in “The Wiz.” The third still from the movie, Oz, the Great and Powerful shows Glinda flying ahead of Oscar, both encased in a large bubble, across a landscape with mountains.

CHAPTER 7 Narrative Films: Telling Stories

- **A Short History of Narrative Film**
  - 1900–1920s: Adaptations, Scriptwriters, and Screenplays
  - 1927–1950: The Coming of Sound and Classical Hollywood Narrative
  - 1950–1980: Art Cinema
  - 1980s–Present: Franchises, Narrative Reflexivity, and Games
  - **HISTORY CLOSE UP: *Salt of the Earth* (1954)**
- **The Elements of Narrative Film**
  - Stories and Plots
  - Characters
  - Diegetic and Nondiegetic Elements
  - Narrative Patterns of Time
  - **VIEWING CUE: *Shutter Island* (2010)**
  - Narrative Space

Narrative Perspectives

TECHNOLOGY IN ACTION: Immersive Film Narrative

VIEWING CUE: *The Royal Tenenbaums* (2001)

Thinking about Film Narrative

FILM IN FOCUS: Narration and Gender in *Gone Girl* (2014)

Shaping Memory, Making History

Narrative Traditions

VIEWING CUE: *Midnight Cowboy* (1969)

FILM IN FOCUS: Classical and Alternative Traditions in *Mildred Pierce* (1945) and *Daughters of the Dust* (1991)

Chapter 7 Review

TCD/Prod.DB/Alamy

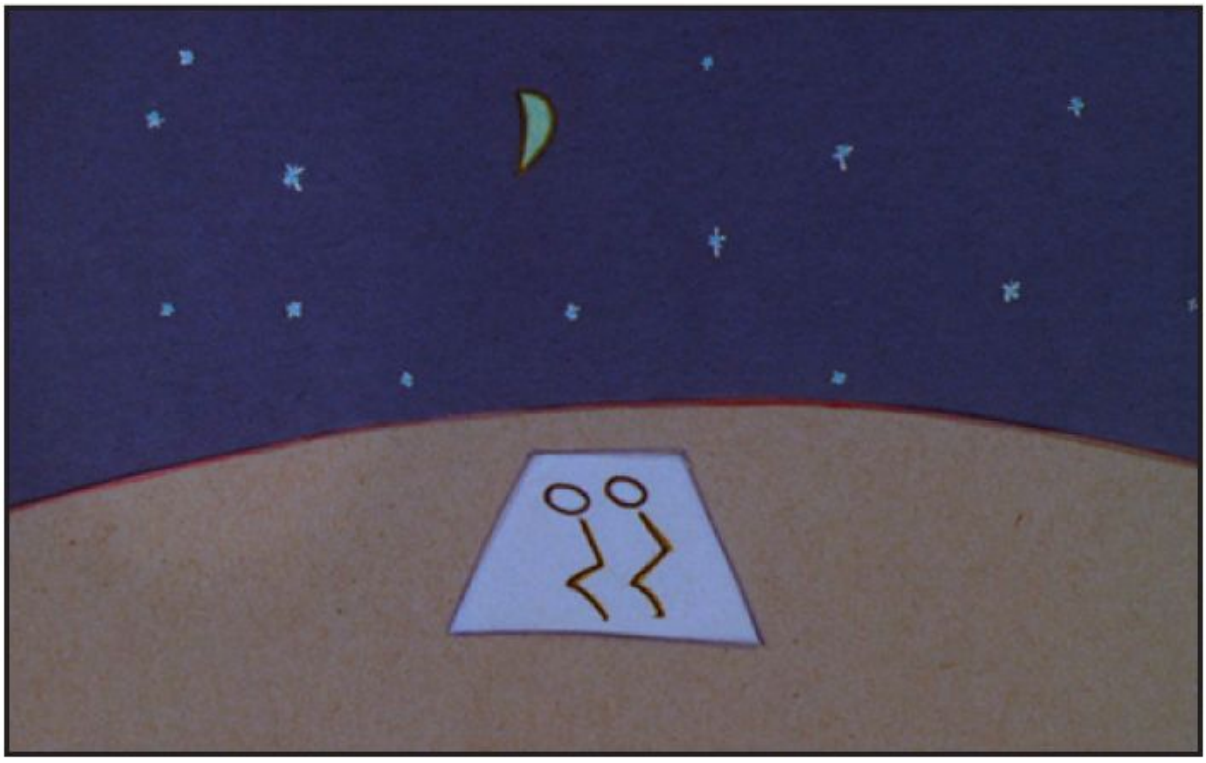
CHAPTER 8 Documentary Films: Representing the Real

- **A Short History of Documentary Cinema**
  - A Prehistory of Documentaries
  - 1895–1905: Early Actualities, Scenics, and Topicals
  - The 1920s: Robert Flaherty and the Soviet Documentaries
  - 1930–1945: The Politics and Propaganda of Documentary
  - 1950s–1970s: New Technologies and the Arrival of Television
  - 1980s–Present: Digital Cinema, Cable, and Reality TV
- **The Elements of Documentary Films**
  - Nonfiction and Non-Narrative
  - Expositions: Organizations That Show or Describe
  - **VIEWING CUE: *The Cove* (2009)**
  - **FILM IN FOCUS: Nonfiction and Non-Narrative in *Stories We Tell* (2013)**
  - Rhetorical Positions
  - **VIEWING CUE: *He Named Me Malala* (2015)**
- **Thinking about Documentary Films**
  - Confronting Assumptions
  - Altering Opinions
  - Interpretive Contexts and Traditions

HISTORY CLOSE UP: Indigenous Media

TECHNOLOGY IN ACTION: Documentary Sound

Chapter 8 Review



[CHAPTER 9 Animation and Experimental Media: Challenging Form]

A Short History of Animation and Experimental Media

- 1910s–1920s: Early Avant-Garde Movements
- 1930s–1940s: Sound and Vision
- 1950s–1960s: International Animation and the Postwar American Avant-Garde
- **FILM IN FOCUS: Avant-Garde Visions in *Meshes in the Afternoon* (1943)**
- **HISTORY CLOSE UP: Floyd Norman**
- 1968–1980: Beyond North America
- 1989–Present: New Technologies and New Media

Principles of Experimental Media and Animation

- Abstraction and Figuration
- Experimental Organizations: Associative, Structural, and Participatory
- Animation Modes: 2-D, 3-D, Stop-Motion
- **TECHNOLOGY IN ACTION: Animation through the Decades**

Thinking about Experimental Media and Animation

- Expanding Perception
- Experimental Film Styles and Approaches
- **VIEWING CUE: *Gently Down the Stream* (1981)**
- **VIEWING CUE: *The Future (2011)***

FILM IN FOCUS: Webs of Style in *Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse* (2018)

Chapter 9 Review

TCD/Alamy

Description
The blackboard shows a chalk drawing of many stick figures holding hands from the left side of the frame to the right side. The woman is cutting out red stick figures holding hands.

CHAPTER 10 Movie Genres: Conventions, Formulas, and Audience Expectations

- **A Short History of Film Genre**
  - Historical Origins of Genres
  - 1890s–1910s: Early Film Genres
  - 1920s–1940s: Genre and the Studio System
  - 1948–1970s: Postwar Film Genres
  - 1970s–Present: New Hollywood, Sequels, and Global Genres
- **The Elements of Film Genre**
  - Conventions
  - Formulas and Myths
  - **TECHNOLOGY IN ACTION: Special Effects and Iconography in Science Fiction**
  - Audience Expectations
- **Six Movie Genres**
  - Comedies
  - Westerns
  - Melodramas

VIEWING CUE: *The Searchers* (1956)

Musicals

VIEWING CUE: *La La Land* (2016)

Horror Films

Crime Films

FILM IN FOCUS: Genre and Gender in *Jennifer's Body* (2009)

Thinking about Film Genre

Prescriptive and Descriptive Approaches

Classical and Revisionist Traditions

VIEWING CUE: *Unforgiven* (1992)

HISTORY CLOSE UP: *John Waters and Midnight Movies*

Local and Global Genres

Chapter 10 Review

PART 4 CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES: reading and writing about film

CHAPTER 11 Reading about Film: Critical Theories and Methods

- **The Evolution of Film Theory**
- **Early and Classical Film Theory**
  - Early Film Theory
  - Classical Film Theories: Formalism and Realism
- **Postwar Film Culture and Criticism**
  - Film Journals
  - Auteur Theory
  - Genre Theory
- **Contemporary Film Theory**
  - Structuralism and Semiotics
  - **VIEWING CUE: *The Wizard of Oz* (1939)**
  - Poststructuralism
  - Theories of Gender and Sexuality
  - Cultural Studies
  - **FILM IN FOCUS: *Clueless* about Contemporary Film Theory? (1995)**
  - Film and Philosophy
  - Postmodernism
  - Film Theory and Digital Culture
- **Chapter 11 Review**

Columbia/Kobal/Shutterstock

CHAPTER 12 Writing a Film Essay: Observations, Arguments, Research, and Analysis

Writing an Analytical Film Essay

Personal Opinion and Objectivity

VIEWING CUE: *Birdman* (2014)

Identifying Your Readers

Elements of the Analytical Film Essay

Preparing to Write about a Film

Asking Questions

Taking Notes

Selecting a Topic

FILM IN FOCUS: Analysis, Audience, and *Minority Report* (2002)

Elements of a Film Essay

Thesis Statement

Outline and Topic Sentences

Revising, Formatting, and Proofreading

Writer's Checklist

Researching the Movies

Distinguishing Research Materials

Primary Research

Secondary Research

FILM IN FOCUS: Interpretation, Argument, and Evidence in *Rashomon* (1950)

TECHNOLOGY IN ACTION: Creating a Video Essay

Using and Documenting Sources

FILM IN FOCUS: From Research to Writing about *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1920)

Chapter 12 Review

Glossary

Index

The Next Level: Additional Sources

THE FILM EXPERIENCE

PART ONE CULTURAL CONTEXTS
watching, studying, and making movies

Top: Lifestyle pictures/Alamy

Description
The first still, from the movie Star Wars: The Rise of Skywalker, shows the characters Rey, Finn, and Poe in the foreground and Chewbacca, B B-8, and C-3 P O in the background. The second still, from the movie I Am Mother, shows the mother, a robot, seated at a desk containing colorful pens and papers.

CHAPTER 1
Encountering Film: From Preproduction to Exhibition

- Stages of narrative filmmaking
- Mechanisms of film distribution
- Practices of marketing and promotion
- Contexts of film exhibition

CHAPTER 2
History and Historiography: Hollywood and Beyond

- Early silent cinema around the world
- Classical cinema in Hollywood and beyond
- Cinema after World War II
- Globalization of the movies
- Dawn of digital cinema
- Preserving film history

The continual box-office success of the *Star Wars* sequels, most recently *Star Wars: The Rise of Skywalker* (2019), has been fueled by a nostalgia for the original movie known and loved by multiple generations of viewers, by the marketing synergy of Lucasfilm and Walt Disney Studios, and by the state-of-the-art visual effects that re-created and expanded on the original *Star Wars* (1977) aesthetic.

Another science fiction film released in 2019, the Australian *I Am Mother*, targeted specialized audiences at the Sundance Film Festival, where its success attracted the streaming platform Netflix for distribution. The narrative, centered on the unsettling relationship between the robot Mother and a human daughter, has cinematic antecedents in *Metropolis* (1927), *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968), *Terminator* (1984), and *Ex Machina* (2014). By contrast, *Star Wars: The Rise of Skywalker* tells a more

conventional heroic tale, yet reflects the values of its contemporary audience with a female hero and a racially diverse cast.

Despite differences of scale, complexity, and impact, the films were both box-office successes and received positive critical recognition. Although *I Am Mother* earned a fraction of the blockbuster's take, it was a financial success given its comparatively modest production budget. From their production through their promotion, distribution, and exhibition, social and institutional forces shaped these two films in very different ways.

Part 1 of this book identifies institutional, cultural, and historical contexts that shape the film experience, showing us how to connect our personal movie preferences with larger critical perspectives on film. Chapter 1 introduces the movie production process as well as the mechanisms and strategies of film distribution, promotion, and exhibition. Chapter 2 gives an overview of film history as well as strategies for organizing historical information. Understanding these different contexts will help us to develop a broad and analytical perspective on the film experience.

CHAPTER 1 ENCOUNTERING FILM
From Preproduction to Exhibition

Middle: © Warner Bros./Courtesy Everett Collection

Description

The first still, from Fruitvale Station (2013), shows Michael B. Jordan holding a dog and looking at its eyes on the road. The second still, from Creed (2015), shows Michael B. Jordan running on the street during a fitness training session. The third still, from Black Panther (2018), shows Michael B. Jordan wearing armor along with the chief of the border tribes W'Kabi.

Between 2013 and 2018, Ryan Coogler directed three very different films: *Fruitvale Station* (2013), *Creed* (2015), and *Black Panther* (2018). Although all three feature Michael B. Jordan and share important questions about racial identity and cultural violence, the production, distribution, and exhibition of the three films illustrate how films, even by the same director, can be shaped by extremely different institutional histories that in turn shape our understanding of them.

Based on actual events that occurred in 2008 in California, *Fruitvale Station* is a small but intense drama about an African American man mistakenly shot and killed by a transit policeman. When the film's theatrical release in July 2013 coincided with the acquittal of the police officer who killed a young, unarmed African American man in Florida, *Fruitvale Station* became part of larger conversations, still ongoing, about justice in the streets of America.

Creed traveled a different path. This franchise film inherited the whole history of the *Rocky* series, which focused on star Sylvester Stallone's character as a working-class boxer. In *Creed*, Rocky, an older and wiser man, trains the son of his old rival. A more formulaic film than *Fruitvale*

Station, it appealed to both African American and broader audiences and became a box-office success.

Finally, as part of the popular Marvel Cinematic Universe film series, *Black Panther* ramped up its production values and its financial and cultural success. The film — about superhero T'Challa's fight to save the fictional African nation of Wakanda — won three Academy Awards and grossed over $1.3 billion worldwide, becoming the highest-grossing movie in history with a black director and a majority-black cast.

As these three disparate films suggest, film production, distribution, and exhibition shape our encounters with movies, and these aspects of film are in turn shaped by how movies are received by audiences.

LearningCurve can help you review. Go to **launchpadworks.com**

Before audiences experience a film, an extensive process of preproduction, production, distribution, and promotion has already taken place. Understanding this process deepens our appreciation for film form and for the labor and craft of filmmakers and reveals ways that culture and society influence filmmaking itself.

This chapter describes the process of production as well as the fate of a finished film as it is distributed, promoted, and exhibited. Such extrafilmic processes describe events that precede, surround, or

follow the actual images we watch and are inseparable from the film experience.

As viewers, our response, enjoyment, and understanding are shaped by where and when we see a movie as much as by the film's form and content. The film experience now encompasses ever smaller viewing devices (including computers, iPads, and smartphones), changing social environments (from IMAX to home theaters), and cultural activities designed to promote interest in individual films (reading about films, directors, and stars; playing tie-in video games; watching special editions on DVD or Blu-ray; or connecting to social media that support a film franchise). Waiting in line with friends for a Thursday night premiere and half-watching an edited in-flight movie are significantly different experiences that lead to different forms of appreciation and understanding. Overall, it is helpful to think of production and reception as a cycle rather than a one-way process: what goes into making and circulating a film anticipates the moment of viewing, and viewing tastes and habits influence film production and dissemination.

KEY OBJECTIVES

- List the stages of filmmaking, from preproduction through production to postproduction, and explain how each stage informs what we see on the screen.
- Describe how the mechanisms of film distribution determine what films we can see as well as when and how we can see them.

- Analyze how film promotion predisposes us to see certain films and to see them in certain ways.
- Evaluate the ways in which film exhibition both structures and is influenced by audience reception.
- Explain the ways in which media convergence and rapid technological advances are affecting all aspects of the film experience, from production to consumption.

Production: How Films Are Made

The aim at each step of filmmaking is to create an artistic and commercial product that will engage, please, or provoke viewers. In short, film **production** is a multilayered activity in which industry, art, technology, and imagination intertwine. It describes the different stages — from the financing and scripting of a film to its final edit and the addition of production **credits** naming the companies and individuals involved — that contribute to the construction of a movie. Does the film showcase the work of the director or the screenwriter? The cinematographer or the composer of the musical score? How do the answers to these questions affect viewers' perspectives on the film? Although some films highlight certain dimensions of filmmaking more than others, the production process almost always anticipates an audience and implies a certain kind of viewer. Therefore, understanding the production process allows us to better appreciate and effectively analyze films.

Preproduction

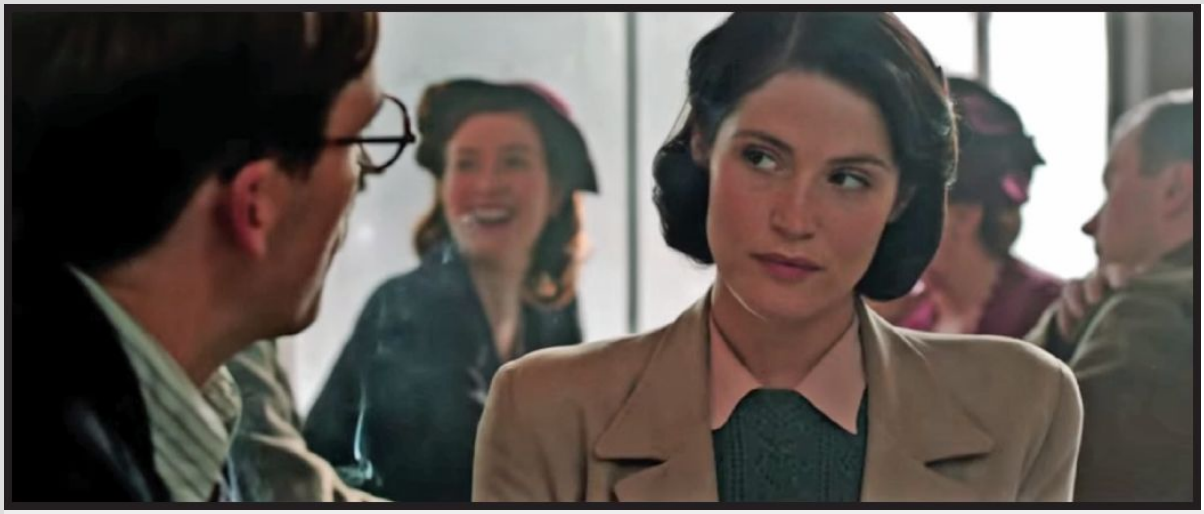
Although the word *production* describes the entire process of making a film, a great deal happens — and often a long time passes — before a film begins to be shot. **Preproduction** is the phase when a film project is in development. In **narrative** filmmaking (scripted films; see also Chapter 7), the efforts of the screenwriter, producer, and

sometimes director — often in the context of a studio or an independent production company — combine at this stage to conceive and refine an idea for a film. Funds are raised, rights are secured, a crew is assembled, casting decisions are made, and key aspects of the film's design (including location scouting and the construction of sets and costumes) are developed during the preproduction phase. Documentary filmmakers might conduct archival or location research, investigate their subject, and conduct interviews during this period.

Screenwriters

A **screenwriter** (or scriptwriter) is often the individual who generates the idea for a narrative film, either as an original concept or as an adaptation of another source (such as a novel, true story, or comic book). The screenwriter presents that early concept or material in a **treatment**, a short prose description of the action of a film and major characters of the story, written before the screenplay. The treatment is then gradually expanded to a complete **screenplay** (or script) — the text from which a movie is made, including dialogue and information about action, settings, shots, and transitions. This undergoes several versions, from the temporary screenplay submitted by the screenwriter to the final shooting script that details exact scenes and camera setups. As these different scripts evolve, one writer may be responsible for every version, or different writers may be employed at each stage,

resulting in minor and sometimes major changes along the way. Even with a finished and approved script, in the studio context an uncredited **script doctor** may be called in to do rewrites. From *Sunset Boulevard* (1950), about a struggling screenwriter trapped in the mansion of a fading silent film star, to *Their Finest* (2016), about a female screenwriter's struggles to script a propaganda film about the heroic evacuation of Dunkirk during World War II, numerous films have found drama in the process of screenwriting itself **[Figure 1.1]**. One reason may be the dramatic shifts and instabilities in the process of moving from a concept to a completed screenplay to a produced film, a process that highlights the difficulties of trying to communicate an individual vision to an audience.



1.1 ***Their Finest*** (2016). A story set in World War II during the British evacuation of Dunkirk, France, the film focuses on a young woman screenwriter (Gemma Arterton) whose personal strength and writing skills describe a different kind of heroism, one that is particularly associated with the contribution of women during that war.

Producers and Studios

The key individuals in charge of movie production and finances are a film's producers. A **producer** oversees each step of a film project, especially the financial aspects, from development to postproduction and a distribution deal. At times, a producer may be fully involved with each step of film production from the selection and development of a script to the creation of an advertising campaign for the finished film. At other times, a producer may be an almost invisible partner who is responsible principally for financing a movie. On some films, the director, screenwriter, or actors also serve as producers.

Producers are extremely powerful in **studio systems**, a term that describes the industrial practices of large film production companies in Hollywood and in other national film industries. The Hollywood studio era extended from the 1920s through the 1950s. During this time, producers often had significant input into creative decisions. For example, production supervisor Irving B. Thalberg and studio mogul Louis B. Mayer strongly influenced the creative direction of Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer (MGM), one of the largest and most profitable studios. Meanwhile, producer David O. Selznick left MGM and founded his own studio, where he controlled all stages of production, beginning with the identification of the primary material for films. For instance, he acquired *Gone with the Wind* as a property even before the novel was published. Selznick supervised

every aspect of the 1939 film version of the best-seller, even changing directors during production — a process documented in his famous production memos. Since the end of the studio system, producers of Hollywood films continue to be heavily involved with financing, but in most cases today, they no longer have the same level of creative control.

The Hollywood production model is not the only one. For example, producers of independent films from the 1990s onward have often taken a different sort of role and have worked to facilitate the creative freedom of the writer and director, arranging the financing for the film as well as hiring a cast and crew, scheduling, shooting, **postproduction** (the period in the filmmaking process that occurs after principal photography has been completed, usually consisting of editing, sound, and visual effects work), and distribution. For example, producer James Schamus first worked with Ang Lee on the independent film *Eat Drink Man Woman* (1994) and cowrote the screenplays of *Sense and Sensibility* (1995), *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (2000), and *Taking Woodstock* (2009). As vice president of Focus Features (a specialty division of Universal), Schamus shepherded Lee's *Brokeback Mountain* (2005) through all stages of production.

Regardless of the size or type of film being made, distinctions among the tasks and roles of types of producers exist. In recent years, an **executive producer** may be connected to a film primarily

in name, playing a role in financing or facilitating a film deal and having little creative or technical involvement. On a documentary, an executive producer might work with a television channel commissioning the program, a streaming site such as Netflix, public funding agencies like the National Endowment for the Arts, or even private donors. A coproducer credit may designate an investor or an executive with a particular production company who helped fund the movie but may have had no role in its actual production. The **line producer** is in charge of the daily business of tracking costs and maintaining the production schedule of a film, while a **unit production manager** is responsible for reporting and managing the details of receipts and purchases.

The budget of a film, whether big or minuscule, is handled by the producers. In budgeting, **above-the-line expenses** are the initial costs of contracting the major personnel, such as directors and stars, as well as administrative and organizational expenses in setting up a film production. **Below-the-line expenses** are the technical and material costs — costumes, sets, transportation, and so on — involved in the actual making of a film. **Production values** demonstrate how the quality of the film's images and sounds reflects the extent of these two expenses. In both subtle and not-so-subtle ways, production values often shape viewers' expectations about a film. High production values suggest a more spectacular or more professionally made movie. Low production values do not necessarily mean a poorly made film. In both cases, we need to adjust our expectations to the style associated with the budget.

Financing Film Production

Financing and managing production expenses is a critical ingredient in making a movie. Traditionally, studios and producers have worked with banks or large financial institutions to acquire this financing, and the term *bankable* has emerged as a way of indicating that a film has the necessary ingredients — such as a famous star or well-known literary source — to make that investment worth the risk. A mainstream action movie like *Suicide Squad* (2016), starring Will Smith, might cost well over $100 million to produce — a significant investment that assumes a significant financial return. Developed alongside the conception of a film, therefore, is a plan to find a large enough audience to return that investment and, ideally, a profit.

Some films follow a less typical financing path. Kevin Smith made *Clerks* (1994) by charging expenses to various credit cards. The 1990s saw a rise in independent film as financing strategies changed. Instead of relying on a single source such as a bank or a studio, independent filmmaking is financed by organized groups of individual investors or presales of distribution or broadcast rights in different markets. In the absence of studio backing, an independent film must appeal to potential investors with a known quantity, such as the director's reputation or the star's box-office clout. Even then, fundraising is often challenging. Although major star Julianne Moore was attached to Lisa Cholodenko's project *The Kids Are All*

Right (2010) for five years, raising the film's $4 million budget was difficult **[Figure 1.2]**. Filmmakers as successful as Spike Lee (*Do the Right Thing*, 1989) and Zach Braff (*Garden State*, 2004) have turned to the Kickstarter website to raise funding for recent projects.

1.2 ***The Kids Are All Right*** (2010). A modestly budgeted independent production usually requires name stars to attract financing. Even with cast members committed, however, Lisa Cholodenko's comedic drama about lesbian parents took years to produce.

Nonfiction films also require financing. Documentaries may be sponsored by an organization, produced by a television channel, or funded by a combination of individual donors and public funds.

Casting Directors and Agents

With the increasing costs of films and the necessity of attracting money with a bankable project, the roles of casting directors and agents have become more important. Traditionally the work of a **casting director**, the practice of identifying the actors who would work best in particular scripted roles emerged during the advent of the star system around 1910. Around this time, Florence Lawrence, the exceedingly popular star of Biograph Studio who was known as the "Biograph Girl," first demanded to be named and given a screen credit. Since then, often in consultation with directors, producers, and writers, casting directors have become bigger and more widely credited players in determining the look and scale of films as they revolve around the cast of stars and actors in those films.

Agents represent actors, directors, writers, and other major individuals in a film production. They negotiate with writers, casting directors, and producers and enlist different personnel for a movie. The significance and power of the agent extends back at least to the 1930s, when talent agent Lew Wasserman, working as a publicist for the Music Corporation of America (MCA), began to create independent, multiple-movie deals for Bette Davis, Errol Flynn, James Stewart, and many others. By the mid-1950s, Wasserman and others had established a **package-unit approach** to film production whereby the agent, producer, and casting director determine a script, stars, and other major personnel as a key first step in a major production, establishing the production model that would dominate after the demise of the traditional studio system. From the mid-1970s through the 1990s, so-called superagents would sometimes

predetermine a package of stars and other personnel from which a film must be constructed. In the heyday of superagents, Michael Ovitz wielded extraordinary power and control, assembling movie production packages around Steven Spielberg, Tom Cruise, Madonna, and Robert De Niro for films such as *Jurassic Park* (1993), *Tootsie* (1982), and *Goodfellas* (1990).

Locations, Production Design, Sets, and Costumes

In narrative films, the interaction between characters and the physical location of the action is often a central dimension of a film; hence, choices about location and set design are critical. Likewise, documentary filmmaking depends on location as well — from the record of a strike in *Harlan County, U.S.A.* (1976) to nature documentaries like *Planet Earth II* (2016) — but it also uses sets for interviews.

Location scouts became commonplace in the early twentieth century. These individuals determine and secure places that provide the most suitable environment for shooting different movie scenes. Choosing a location is often determined by a series of pragmatic questions: Does the place fit the requirements of the script, and how expensive would it be to film at this location? Many films rely on constructed sets that re-create a specific place, but the desire for movie realism often results in the use of actual locations to

invigorate a scene. Thus the *Lord of the Rings* (2001–2003) and *Hobbit* trilogies (2012–2014) take advantage of the lush and wild location filming in New Zealand, while *Only Lovers Left Alive* (2013) **[Figure 1.3]** makes the labyrinthine streets of Tangiers and the ravaged and vacated urban landscape of nighttime Detroit important backdrops for its tale about two emotionally impoverished and disenchanted vampires. In recent decades, the cinematic task of re-creating real-seeming environments has shifted to computer-graphics technicians. These technicians design the models to be digitally transferred onto film, becoming, in a sense, a new kind of location scout.

1.3 ***Only Lovers Left Alive*** (2013). Cities like Tangiers and Detroit become distinctive backgrounds for Jim Jarmusch's moody, mordantly funny vampire story.

The **production designer** determines the film's overall look. **Art directors** are responsible for supervising the conception and construction of the physical environment in which actors appear, including sets, locations, props, and costumes. The **set decorators** complete the look of a set with the details. For example, in a movie set in a particular historical period and place, such as *Argo* (2012), the art department coordinated to create sets and locations that accurately reflected Tehran in 1980 and that also highlighted the suspenseful atmosphere surrounding the rescue of six Americans.

The role of **costume designers**, those who plan and prepare how actors will be dressed as their characters, greatly increased as the movie business expanded in the 1930s. Costume designers ensure the splendor, suitability, and sometimes the historical accuracy of the movie characters' appearances. Indeed, for those films in which costumes and settings are central to the story — films set in fantasy worlds or historical eras, such as *Pan's Labyrinth* (2006), which uses both kinds of settings — one could argue that the achievement of the film becomes inseparable from the decisions made about the art and costume design. In the end, successful films integrate all levels of the design, from the sets to the costumes, as in *The Grand Budapest Hotel* (2014), where the costumes re-create the 1930s in a luxurious hotel in Eastern Europe but have a zany excess and decadence that mirrors the plot and themes.

Production

Most mythologized of all phases of moviemaking is production itself or **principal photography**, which is the majority of footage that is filmed. The weeks or months of actual shooting, on set or on location, are known as a **film shoot**. Countless films, from *The Bad and the Beautiful* (1952) and *Irma Vep* (1996) to *Once Upon a Time … in Hollywood* (2019), dramatize inspired or fraught interactions among cast, crew, and the person in charge of it all, the director **[Figure 1.4]**. The reality of production varies greatly with the scale of the film and its budget, but the director, who has often been involved in all of the creative phases of preproduction, must now work closely with the actors and production personnel — most notably, the camera units headed by the cinematographer — to realize a collaborative vision.

1.4 ***Irma Vep*** (1996). Maggie Cheung stars in a film about making a film — starring Maggie Cheung.

The Director

The earliest films of the twentieth century involved very few people in the process of shooting a film, with the assumption that the cameraman was the de facto director. By 1907, however, a division of labor separated production roles, placing the director in charge of all others on the film set. Today the **director** is commonly regarded as the chief creative presence and the primary manager in film production, responsible for and overseeing virtually all the work of making a movie — guiding the actors, determining the position of the camera, and selecting which images appear in the finished film.

Directors have different methods and degrees of involvement. Alfred Hitchcock claimed he never needed to see the action through the camera viewfinder because his script directions were so precise that there would be only one way to compose the shot. Others are comfortable relinquishing important decisions to their assistant director (AD), cinematographer, or sound designer. Still others, like Woody Allen and Barbra Streisand, assume multiple roles (screenwriter, actor, and editor) in addition to that of director. In Hollywood during the studio era, when directors' visions often were subordinated to a "house style" or a producer's vision, directors worked so consistently and honed their craft with such skilled

personnel that critics can detect a given director's signature style across routine assignments. This has elevated directors like Howard Hawks (*Bringing Up Baby*, 1938, and *His Girl Friday*, 1940) and Nicholas Ray (*Rebel Without a Cause*, 1955) to the status of **auteurs** — directors who are considered "authors" of films in which they express their own individual vision and experiences.

Today a company backing a film will choose or approve a director for projects that seem to fit with his or her skills and talents. For example, Mexican director Alfonso Cuarón's success with films like *A Little Princess* (1995) and *Great Expectations* (1998) led to his early involvement with *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban* (2004). Because of the control and assumed authority of the director, contemporary viewers often look for stylistic and thematic consistencies in films by the same director, and filmmakers like Quentin Tarantino have become celebrities. This follows a model prevalent in art cinema made outside Hollywood in which the vision of a director like Jean-Luc Godard or Tsai Ming-liang (*What Time Is It There?*, 2001) is supported by the producer and made manifest in virtually every aspect of the film.

The Cast, Cinematographer, and Other On-Set Personnel

The director works with the actors to bring out the desired performance, and these collaborations vary greatly. Because film

scenes are shot out of order and in a variety of shot scales, the cast's performance must be delivered in bits and pieces. Some actors prepare a technical performance; others rely on the director's prompting or other, more spontaneous inspiration. Daniel Day-Lewis, the star of *Lincoln* (2012), *There Will Be Blood* (2007), and *Phantom Thread* (2017), is known for immersing himself in every role to such an extent that he stays in character throughout the entire production, even when the cameras are not rolling. David Fincher's exacting directorial style requires scores of **takes**, or different versions of a shot, a grueling experience for *Zodiac* (2007) actors Jake Gyllenhaal and Robert Downey Jr. Some directors gravitate to particularly sympathetic and dynamic relations with actors — for example, Tim Burton with Johnny Depp, Pedro Almodóvar with Penelope Cruz, and Martin Scorsese with Robert De Niro and Leonardo DiCaprio.

The **cinematographer**, also known as the director of photography (DP), selects the cameras, film stock, lighting, and lenses to be used as well as the camera setup or position. In consultation with the director, the cinematographer determines how the action will be shot, the images composed, and, later, the kind of exposure needed to print the takes. The cinematographer oversees a **camera operator** (who physically manipulates the camera) and other camera and lighting crew. Many films owe more to the cinematographer than to almost any other individual in the production. *Days of Heaven* (1978) profits as much from the eye of cinematographer Néstor Almendros

as from the direction of Terrence Malick. Likewise, cinematographer Michael Ballhaus's work on films such as Rainer Werner Fassbinder's *The Marriage of Maria Braun* (1979) and Martin Scorsese's *The Departed* (2006) arguably displays the artistic singularity and vision that are usually assigned to film directors **[Figure 1.5]**.

1.5 ***The Departed*** (2006). Cinematographer Michael Ballhaus suggests interpretations of the characters' motives through shot composition and lighting.

Other personnel are also on the set — including the **production sound mixer** (who is the sound engineer on the production set) and other sound crew, including the boom operator; the **grips** who install lighting and dollies; the special effects coordinator; the scenic, hair, and make-up artists; and the catering staff. A production coordinator helps this complex operation run smoothly. During the shoot, the director reviews **dailies** (footage shot that day) and begins to make **selects** (takes that are chosen to use in editing a

scene). After principal photography is completed, sets are broken down, and the film "wraps," or completes production. A film shoot is an intense, concentrated effort in which the contributions of visionary artists and professional crew mesh with schedule and budget constraints.

Postproduction

Some of the most important aspects of a finished film — including editing, sound, and visual effects — are achieved after principal photography is completed and production is over. How definitive or efficient the process is depends on many factors. A documentary may be constructed almost entirely during this phase, or a commercial feature film may have to be recut in response to test screenings or the wishes of a new executive who has assumed authority over the project.

Editing and Sound

The director works closely with the editor and his or her staff during **editing** — the process of selecting and joining film footage and shots into a finished film with a distinctive style and rhythm. This process now is largely carried out with digital footage and computer-based editing. Editing is anticipated during preproduction of fiction films with the preparation of a shooting script, and in production it is recognized in the variety and number of takes provided. Only a

fraction of the footage that is shot is included in the finished film, making editing crucial to its final form. In documentary production, editing may be the most important stage in shaping the film. When the editing is completed, the picture is said to be *locked*.

Postproduction also includes complex processes for editing sound and adding special effects. A sound editor oversees the work of **sound editing** — combining music, dialogue, and effects tracks to interact with the image track. Less apparent than the editing of images, sound editing can create noises that relate directly to the action of the image (such as matching the image of a dog barking), underpin those images and actions with music (such as the pounding beats that follow an army into battle), or insert sounds that counterpoint the images in ways that complicate their meanings (such as using a religious hymn to accompany the flight of a missile). In the **sound mixing** process, all of the elements of the soundtrack — music, effects, and dialogue — are combined and adjusted to their final levels.

Special Effects

Special effects are techniques that enhance a film's realism or surpass assumptions about realism with spectacle. Whereas some special effects are prepared in preproduction (such as the building of elaborate models of futuristic cities), others can be generated in

production (with special camera filters or setups) or created on set (for example, by using pyrotechnics).

Today most special effects are created in postproduction and are distinguished by the term **visual effects** — imagery combined with live action footage by teams of computer technicians and artists. In the contemporary digital age, computer technicians have virtually boundless postproduction capabilities to enhance and transform an image. Fantastical scenes and characters can be acted out using **green-screen technology**, in which actors perform in front of a plain green background; and **motion-capture technology**, which transfers the actors' physical movements to **computer-generated imagery (CGI)**, such as Andy Serkis as Gollum in *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy (2001–2003). The settings of the *Star Wars* sequel trilogy (2015–2019) were generated largely in postproduction **[Figure 1.6]**. All of the personnel who work behind the scenes on these many levels of filmmaking are acknowledged when the titles and credits are added in the final stage of postproduction.

1.6 ***Star Wars: Episode VIII — The Last Jedi*** (2017). Although the original *Star Wars* films used multiple sets, models, and props, much of the sequel series was generated using state-of-the-art computer technology.

Distribution: What We Can See

The completed film reaches its audience through the process of **distribution**, in which films are provided to venues including theaters and video stores, broadcast and cable television, internet streaming and **video on demand (VOD)**, libraries and classrooms — even hotels and airlines. Despite these many outlets for distribution, many worthy films never find a distributor and are never seen. As avenues of distribution multiply, new questions about the role of film culture in our individual and collective experience arise. Our tastes, choices, and opportunities are shaped by aspects of the industry of which we may be unaware, and we, in turn, influence the kinds of films that distributors choose to release.

The discussion that follows, which emphasizes the U.S. feature-film distribution system since it often controls even foreign theaters, explores how viewers are prepared by the social and economic machinery of distribution. Some contemporary companies, such as Netflix, Amazon, Hulu, and Disney, occupy dual roles as both distributors and producers of films. Thus, the line between the two operations begins to blur — as does the relation between production and exhibition (see also Movie Exhibition: The Where, When, and How of Movie Experiences later in this chapter).

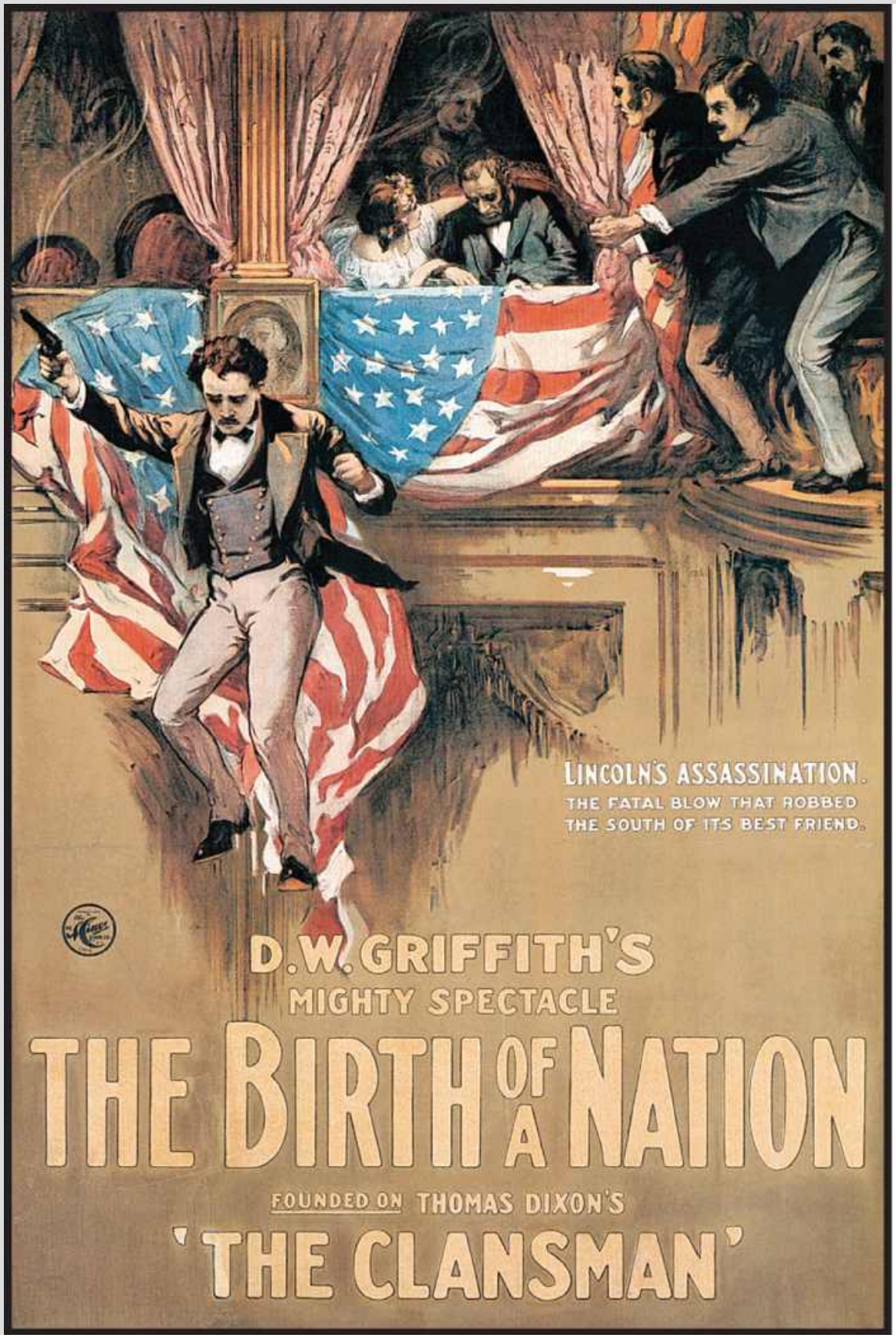
Distributors

A **distributor** is a company or an agency that acquires the rights to a movie from the filmmakers or producers (sometimes by contributing to the costs of producing the film) and makes the movie available to audiences by renting, selling, or licensing it to theaters or other exhibition outlets. Top-grossing distributors today include Walt Disney, Warner Bros., Sony Pictures, 20th Century Fox, Universal, Paramount Pictures, and Lionsgate. Smaller companies include A24, Magnolia Pictures, and divisions of both Netflix and Amazon.

The types of films that are produced depend on what Hollywood and other film cultures assume can be successfully distributed. Film history has been marked with regular battles and compromises between filmmakers and distributors about what audiences are willing to watch. Michael Cimino's 1980 film *Heaven's Gate* has become an infamous example: with an unprecedented budget of over $40 million, the completed version of the film was over four hours long, severely complicating how the film could be distributed and provoking harsh reviews from critics and audiences. Decades earlier, Orson Welles's *The Magnificent Ambersons* (1942) faced similar problems when studio heads determined that they needed to cut over an hour from the 135-minute movie in order to distribute it successfully.

Evolution of the Feature Film

Consider the following examples of how the prospects for distributing and exhibiting a film can influence and even determine its content and form, including decisions about its length. From around 1911 to 1915, D. W. Griffith and other filmmakers struggled to convince movie studios to allow them to expand the length of a movie from roughly fifteen minutes to over 100 minutes. Although longer films imported from Europe achieved some success, most producers felt that it would be impossible to distribute longer movies because they believed audiences would not sit still for more than twenty minutes. Griffith persisted and continued to stretch the length of his films, insisting that new distribution and exhibition patterns would create and attract new audiences — those willing to accept more complex stories and to pay more for them. In the end, Griffith proved to be right: his three-hour epic, *The Birth of a Nation* (1915), was both an enormous commercial and financial success and a major cultural event, comparable to a traditional theatrical or operatic experience. Perhaps because of this success, the film also unleashed major debate and protests about its racist representations of African Americans and its depiction of the Ku Klux Klan as heroic saviors **[Figure 1.7]**. The film nonetheless became a benchmark in overturning one distribution formula, which offered a continuous program of numerous short films, and establishing a new one, which concentrated on a single **feature film**, a longer narrative movie that is the primary attraction for audiences.



Everett Collection, Inc.

1.7 Advertisement for *The Birth of a Nation* (1915). The ambitious nature of D. W. Griffith's controversial epic was apparent in its advertisements and unprecedented three-hour running time.

Description
The advertisement shows John Wilkes Booth armed with a gun, jumping off a balcony. Three men try to stop him as a woman tends to President Lincoln seated in the balcony. The U. S. flag is draped around the railing of the balcony. Text at the right-center reads, "Lincoln's Assassination. The fatal blow that robbed the South of its best friend." The text below reads, D. W. Griffith's Mighty Spectacle, The Birth of a Nation, founded on Thomas Dixon's 'The Clansman.'

After 1915, most films were distributed with ninety-to 120-minute running times, and this pattern has proved durable. Sometimes, studios produce epic films with unusually long running times — from *Gone with the Wind* (1939) to *The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King* (2003) — which may be perceived by audiences as more important or more serious than the average movie because of their length. In a different manner, serial or sequel films can present an extremely long narrative as part of an episodic viewing experience, as with the television distribution of the three *Godfather* films (1972–1990) or the eight *Harry Potter* movies (2001–2011), allowing viewers to watch and absorb a lengthy and highly complex story periodically.

Our experience of a movie — its length, its choice of stars (over unknown actors, for example), its subject matter, and even its title — is determined by decisions made about distribution before the film becomes available to viewers. Most movies are produced to be distributed to certain kinds of audiences. Distribution patterns — whether a movie is available everywhere for everyone at the same time, is released during the holiday season, or is available only in specialty video stores or on specific streaming sites — bring expectations that a particular film either fulfills or frustrates.

Release Strategies

As one of its primary functions, distribution determines the number of copies of a film that will be available and the number of locations at which the movie will be seen. During the heyday of the Hollywood studio system, studios either showed their films in their own theater chains or sold them to theaters in packages, a practice known as **block booking**. Under the block booking model, studios required theaters to show cheaper, less desirable films as a condition of booking the star-studded A pictures. This practice was the target of antitrust legislation and finally was outlawed in the 1948 Supreme Court decision *United States v. Paramount Pictures, Inc.*, which divorced the studios from their theater chains and required that films be sold individually. Before and after 1948, distribution strategies have sometimes kicked off with a **premiere** — a red carpet event celebrating the opening night of a movie that is attended by

stars and attracts press attention. A film's initial opening in a limited number of **first-run theaters** (theaters that show recently released movies) as exclusive engagements gradually was expanded, allowing for a series of premieres.

In 1975, Steven Spielberg's *Jaws* introduced the practice of **wide release**, opening in hundreds of theaters simultaneously. In these cases, a film with a mass circulation of premieres — sometimes referred to as **saturation booking** or a saturated release — is screened in as many locations as possible in the United States (and increasingly abroad) as soon as possible. For a blockbuster such as *Avengers: Endgame* (2019), the distributors immediately release the movie in a maximum number of locations and theaters to attract large audiences before its novelty wears off. This distribution tactic usually promises audiences a film that is easy to understand and appeals to most tastes (for example, offering action sequences, breathtaking special effects, or a light romance rather than controversial topics).

A **limited release** may be distributed only to major cities — the cult comedy *Wet Hot American Summer* (2001) never played in more than thirty theaters — and then expand its distribution, depending on the film's initial success. Audience expectations for films following a limited release pattern are generally less fixed than for wide releases. These films usually will be recognized in terms of the previous work of the director or an actor, but they will offer a

certain novelty or experimentation (such as a controversial subject or a strange plot twist) that presumably will be better appreciated as the film is publicly debated and understood through the reviews and discussions that follow its initial release. The Weinstein Company's decision to limit the release of Todd Haynes's experimental biopic of Bob Dylan, *I'm Not There* (2007), to major cities was a strategic bid to maximize critical attention to the film's daring and the intriguing premise of its star performances, which include Cate Blanchett playing the 1960s Dylan.

As part of these general practices, distribution strategies have developed over time to shape or respond to the interests and tastes of intended audiences. **Platforming** involves releasing a film in gradually widening markets and theaters so that it slowly builds its reputation and momentum through reviews and word of mouth. The strategy for expanding a release depends on box-office performance: if a film does well in its opening weekend, it will open in more cities on more screens. When the low-budget supernatural horror film *Paranormal Activity* (2007) was acquired and released by Paramount, audiences became directly involved in determining where the film would open by voting on director Oren Peli's website.

Independent films also use platforming as a strategy. For example, Jonathan Caouette's *Tarnation* (2003) — which does not use a conventional screenplay and was edited on a home computer with an alleged production budget of about $200 — screened at the

Sundance Film Festival with John Cameron Mitchell and Gus Van Sant as executive producers. This publicity led to other festival invitations, a distribution deal for a limited theatrical release, and considerable critical attention.

A movie also can be distributed for special **exclusive release**, premiering in only one or two locations. A dramatic example of this strategy was the restored version of Abel Gance's silent classic *Napoléon*, an epic tale of the life of the French emperor that periodically presents the action simultaneously on three screens. The original film premiered in April 1927. In 1981, the exclusive release of the restored film toured to one theater at a time, accompanied by a full orchestra; seeing it became a privileged event.

Target Audiences

Since the late twentieth century, movies have been distributed with an eye toward reaching specific target audiences — viewers whom producers feel are most likely to want to see a particular film. Producers and distributors aimed *Shaft* (1971), an action film with a black hero, at African American audiences by distributing it primarily in large urban areas. Distributors positioned *T2 Trainspotting* (2017), a hip sequel about former heroin users returning to their lives in Edinburgh, to draw art-house and younger audiences in cities, some suburbs, and college and university towns.

The original *Nightmare on Elm Street* movies (1984–2010), a violent slasher series about the horrific Freddy Krueger, were aimed primarily at the male teenage audience who frequented cineplexes and, later, video stores.

The various distribution strategies all imply important issues about how movies should be viewed and understood. First, by controlling the scope of distribution, these strategies determine the quality and importance of an audience's interactions with a film. As a saturated release, the 2015 attempt to restart the *Fantastic Four* series aimed for swift gratification with a focus on special effects and action, before disappointed word of mouth could spread. On the other hand, *Green Book* (2018) was platformed gradually and benefited from critical reflections on the relationship it depicts between a black classical pianist touring the U.S. south and his white working-class driver **[Figure 1.8]**.

1.8 ***Green Book*** (2018). Platforming this modestly budgeted film cultivated audiences and critical responses.

Second, distribution can identify primary, intended responses to the film as well as secondary, unexpected ones. Movies from the Pixar animation studio might resonate the most with children and their parents, with stories like *Inside Out* (2015), *Finding Dory* (2016), and *Toy Story 4* (2019) **[Figure 1.9]** that address childhood and the process of parenting, with inside jokes and references for adults. But as Pixar has established itself as a source of high-quality animation, their adult following has grown — including former kids who grew up on the company's early movies and now continue to see follow-ups with their favorite characters even as they age out of the primary audience but remain part of the target audience. Awareness of these strategies of targeting indicates how our identification with and comprehension of films are as much a product of our social and cultural locations as they are a product of the film's subject matter and form.

1.9 ***Toy Story 4*** (2019). This computer-animated film is aimed principally at families, but childless audiences may still find plenty to identify with.

Ancillary Markets

Commercial cinema's reach has been expanding ever since studios began to take advantage of television's distribution potential in the mid-1950s. New technologies for watching movies continue to proliferate. In addition to commercial television, films have been distributed via home video formats (like VHS, DVD, and Blu-ray) and video on demand (VOD), which includes online streaming services like Netflix, Amazon Prime Video, and Disney Plus. Today more of a film's revenue is generated by such **ancillary markets** than by its initial theatrical release.

Broadcast and Cable Television Distribution

Originally, the motion picture industry competed with broadcasting, which distributed entertainment directly to the home through radio and later television. However, as television became popular in postwar America, film studios realized that the new medium provided an unprecedented distribution outlet. Later, with the rise of cable television, studios gained even more lucrative opportunities to sell their vast libraries of films. The launch of dedicated movie channels like Turner Classic Movies, for example, were a boon to cinema lovers. As both network and cable channels proliferated, more and more movies began to be presented through television distribution.

In an attempt to reach specialized audiences through subscription cable, distributors like IFC Films have made critically acclaimed foreign and U.S. independent films available on demand the same day they are released in art-house theaters in major cities, allowing television audiences in markets outside large cities access to such works as the Romanian *4 Months, 3 Weeks, 2 Days* (2007), winner of the Cannes Film Festival's top prize. Although the traditional wisdom is that such access will hurt the theatrical box office, the strategy allows such films to reach wider audiences, and positive word of mouth, for both the film and the distributor's "brand," might enhance overall theatrical revenue.

Guaranteed television distribution can also reduce the financial risk for producers and filmmakers and thus, in some situations, allow

for more experimentation or filmmaker control. Starting in the 1990s, (subscription) cable channels such as HBO increasingly began producing their own films that included riskier subjects. Even though these films are presented on the cable channels, a theatrical window for the film to receive reviews and become eligible for awards is sometimes allowed.

Was the movie recently screened for class likely to have been shown on television? If so, in what way? How might such distribution have significantly changed its look or feel?

Television distribution has both positive and negative implications. In some cases, films on television must adjust their style and content to suit constraints of both time and space. For films originally made for theatrical distribution, scenes might be cut to fit a time slot or be interrupted with commercial breaks. In other cases, television distribution may expand the ways movies can communicate with audiences and experiment with different visual forms. For example, *The Singing Detective* (1986) — made explicitly for BBC distribution in the United Kingdom — uses the long length of a television series watched within the home as the means to explore and think about the passage of time, the difficulty of memory, and the many levels of reality and consciousness woven into our daily lives. Meanwhile, Ken Burns's documentary *The*

Vietnam War (2017) uses its episodic ten-part distribution to investigate often overlooked details and facts of that controversial war from multiple angles, too numerous for a theatrical film.

Home Video and Video on Demand

Each new format for the public or private consumption of media — VHS (video home system), LaserDisc, DVD (digital video disk), Blu-ray, and video on demand (VOD), including today's streaming services like Netflix — has offered a new distribution challenge for media makers and a potential new revenue model for rights holders. Independent producers may find it difficult to transfer existing media to new formats or to make enough sales for a particular avenue of distribution to be viable. As with distribution through theaters and through broadcast and cable television, distribution of home video formats and video on demand determines the availability of particular titles to audiences. Viewers may stream a film online, rent or purchase it in a store, receive it by mail from companies like Netflix, or order it from independent distributors such as Kino Lorber.

Historically, there was a specific lag time between a film's theatrical release in a cinema and its release on home video, but these relationships have changed over time. Some movies are distributed direct to home video, skipping the traditional theatrical release altogether, such as the ongoing series of follow-ups to *Bring It On*

(2000). Whether a movie is released on home video after its theatrical run or is made expressly for home video, this type of distribution usually aims to reach the largest possible audience and thus to increase revenues.

As new technologies emerge, distributors frequently engage in "format wars," in which different companies offer competing versions of similar products. For example, the home video era began in the 1980s with competition between Sony's Beta format and VHS. The VHS format won out, and with the widespread use of videocassette recorders (VCRs), studios released films on VHS cassettes, first for rental and then increasingly for sales. A similar battle took place in the mid-2000s between high-definition DVD (HD-DVD, backed by Toshiba) and Blu-ray (backed by Sony); in the end, Blu-ray prevailed. Typically, as in these two cases, one format ends up dominating the market and becomes the primary distribution channel through which viewers experience films at home during that time period.

One of the most significant challenges to distributors posed by home video and video on demand is **piracy**, the unauthorized duplication and circulation of copyrighted material. Despite anticopying software, the circulation of pirated films is widespread and can bypass social, cultural, and legal controls, bringing banned films to viewers in China, for example, or building subcultures and networks around otherwise hard-to-access films.

Before the closing of many video stores caused by the shift to subscriber and on-demand services in the 2000s, the video store was a significant site of film culture. Because the selection in rental stores was based on a market perspective on local audiences as well as the tastes of individual proprietors, some films were distributed to certain cities or neighborhoods and excluded from other locations. The dominant chains (such as Blockbuster, which filed for bankruptcy in 2010) focused on high-concentration, family-oriented shopping sites, offering numerous copies of current popular mainstream movies, as well as mainstream video games. They typically excluded daring subject matter or older titles. Some local independent video stores specialized in art films, cult films, or movie classics (such as those released on DVD by the Criterion Collection). Still other local stores depended on X-rated films for their primary revenue. Sometimes in-store distribution followed cultural as well as commercial logic. Bollywood films, which were available in video and even grocery stores in U.S. neighborhoods with large South Asian populations, provided a tie to cultural traditions and national stars and songs before access to such films became widespread.

For viewers, there are two clear consequences to these patterns of video distribution. The first is that video distribution can control and direct — perhaps more than theatrical distribution does — local responses, tastes, and expectations. The second consequence highlights the sociological and cultural formations of film distribution. As community outlets, video stores were part of the

social fabric of particular neighborhoods. Viewers are consumers, and video stores were forums in which the interests of a community of viewers — in children's film or art-house cinema, for instance — could determine which films were distributed at the store. Michel Gondry's *Be Kind Rewind* (2008) shows an urban community coming together around the films made available at its locally owned video store after its employees begin to produce their own versions of rental titles to replace their demagnetized inventory **[Figure 1.10]**. Such ties are less likely to be forged around recent alternatives to dedicated stores, such as DVD kiosks in grocery stores.

1.10 ***Be Kind Rewind*** (2008). The employees at a neighborhood video store attract a loyal local audience with their do-it-yourself inventory, like this re-created scene from Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968).

The innovation in distribution that was probably most responsible for the decline of the local video store is the DVD rental-by-mail model launched by Netflix in the early 2000s and followed by other

companies. As part of a subscription system that offers viewers a steady stream of DVDs, Netflix members can select and return films as rapidly or as slowly as they wish. This kind of distribution lacks the kind of social interaction that used to exist in video stores.

More recently, high-speed internet has made downloading movies and live streaming the preferred option for many consumers. Online distributors like Netflix, Amazon, Hulu, and Disney face their own set of challenges. If a movie is rented on demand, how many times can it be watched? On how many different devices? Unauthorized downloading and sharing have become even more difficult for distributors to regulate. At the same time, new opportunities for viewing have been generated: mobile devices allow us to choose from an enormous selection of films to watch at any time from any place with an internet connection. With the success of streaming, viewers may feel that they finally have overcome the limits set by distribution, even though economic decisions still shape the circulation of film.

This new ease of online film consumption raises different questions about changing viewing patterns and their implications. Do these new paradigms undermine the social and communal formations of the film experience? Does increased ease of access to film traditions remote in time or location make for a richer film culture? Do more platforms actually result in more viewing options, or do many of these services redivide smaller slices of the same pie? Finally, how do these patterns influence and change the kinds of movies that are

made? The answers to these questions are not clear or certain. These new viewing patterns may simply offer different ways for audiences to create different kinds of communities based on their own interests. Similarly, increased access to periods of film history or foreign film cultures through online services like Kanopy and the Criterion Channel may broaden our sense of both but also may require more work and research into those discovered times and places.

How might the distribution of a film that was released in the last year have been timed to emphasize certain responses? Was it a seasonal release?

Finally, many other films — such as artists' films, activist documentaries, alternative media, and medical or industrial films — are made without the intention of showing them for a profit, and they are not available to view either in a traditional theatrical context or via ancillary markets like broadcast television or home video. Some of these works serve a specific training or promotional purpose and are distributed directly to their intended professional or target audience. Others may find television or educational distributors, like PBS or Women Make Movies. Still others may be uploaded to the internet by individuals.

Distribution Timing

Distribution timing — when a movie is released for public viewing in certain locations or on certain platforms — is another prominent and changing feature of distribution. Adding significantly to our experience of movies, timing can take advantage of the social atmosphere, cultural connotations, or critical scrutiny associated with particular seasons and calendar periods. The summer season and the December holidays are the most important release dates in the United States because audiences usually have more free time to see thrill rides like *John Wick 3* (2019).

Offering a temporary escape from hot weather, a summer release like *Jurassic World* (2015) offers the visual thrills and fun of rampaging dinosaurs, a bit like an old-fashioned sci-fi movie and a bit like the amusement park that the film's plot depicts. The Memorial Day release of *Pearl Harbor* (2001) immediately attracted the sentiments and memories that Americans had of World War II and other global conflicts. The film industry is calculating releases ever more carefully — for example, by holding a promising film for a November release so that it can vie for prestigious (and business-generating) award nominations.

Mistiming a film's release can prove to be a major problem, as was the case in the summer of 2013, when the DreamWorks cartoon *Turbo* followed too close on the heels of *Monsters University* and *Despicable Me 2* to gain much traction with the family audience that all three were targeting. Avoiding unwanted competition can be a

key part of a distributor's timing. For example, distributors moved up the opening of *The Shallows* (2016) to capitalize on positive buzz and to avoid Fourth of July weekend competition **[Figure 1.11]**.

1.11 ***The Shallows*** (2016). Just a few weeks before the scheduled June 2016 release of the shark thriller *The Shallows*, the studio moved its date up by five days to capitalize on rising excitement over the film.

Multiple Releases

Of the several other variations on the tactics of timing, movies sometimes follow a first release or first run with a second release or second run. The first describes a movie's premiere engagement, and the second refers to the redistribution of that film months or years later. After its first release in 1982, for example, Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* made a notable reappearance in 1992 as a longer director's cut **[Figure 1.12]**. Although the first release had only modest success, the second (supported by a surprisingly large audience

discovered in the home video market) appealed to viewers newly attuned to the visual and narrative complexity of the movie. Audiences wanted to see, think about, and see again oblique and obscure details in order to decide, for instance, whether Deckard, the protagonist, was a replicant or a human.

1.12 ***Blade Runner*** (1982, 1992, 2007). Although its initial opening was disappointing, Ridley Scott's dystopian "future noir" was an early success on home video. Theatrical releases of a director's cut for its tenth anniversary and a final cut for its twenty-fifth make the question of the film's definitive identity as interesting as the questions of human versus replicant identity posed by its plot.

For *Blade Runner*'s twenty-fifth anniversary in 2007, a final cut was released theatrically but catered primarily to DVD customers. With multiple releases, financial reward is no doubt a primary goal, as the trend to reissue films in anticipation of or following major awards like the Oscars indicates.

With a film that may have been unavailable to viewers during its first release or that simply may not have been popular, a rerelease can lend it new life and reclaim viewers through a process of rediscovery. When a small movie achieves unexpected popular or critical success or a major award, for example, it can be redistributed with a much wider distribution circuit and to a more eager, sympathetic audience that is already prepared to like the movie. In a version of this practice, Mira Nair's *Salaam Bombay!* (1988) was rereleased in 2013 to commemorate the twenty-fifth anniversary of the debut film by this now-celebrated Indian filmmaker. A rerelease also may occur in the attempt to offer audiences a higher-quality picture or a 3-D repackaging of an older film or to clarify story lines by restoring cut scenes, as was done in 1989 with Columbia Pictures' rerelease of the 1962 Academy Award–winning *Lawrence of Arabia*.

Similarly, television distribution can retime the release of a movie to promote certain attitudes toward it. *It's a Wonderful Life* did not generate much of an audience when it was first released in 1946. Gradually (and especially after its copyright expired in 1975), network and cable television began to run the film regularly, and the film became a Christmas classic shown often and everywhere during that season **[Figure 1.13]**. In 1997, however, the NBC television network reclaimed the exclusive rights to the film's network broadcast in order to limit its television distribution and to try to make audiences see the movie as a special event.

1.13 ***It's a Wonderful Life*** (1946). A box-office disappointment when it initially was released, Frank Capra's film became a ubiquitous accompaniment to the holiday season on television. In recent years, NBC's broadcast restrictions attempted to restore the film's status as an annual family viewing event.

Day-and-Date Release

The **theatrical release window** of a film — the period of time before its availability on home video, video on demand, or television platforms, during which it plays in movie theaters — was historically about three to six months to guarantee box-office revenue. Recently, this period has become shorter and shorter. **Day-and-date release**

refers to a simultaneous-release strategy across different media and venues, such as a theatrical release and VOD availability. This practice is now routine for many smaller distributors. Sometimes films from Magnolia Pictures, like *High-Rise* (2015), will debut on VOD platforms before their theatrical release. In the future, day-and-date release may go further. Some filmmakers such as Christopher Nolan and James Cameron have denounced this idea, while others like Steven Spielberg and Martin Scorsese have encouraged it.

Whether or not this kind of distribution strategy actually announces a radical change in film distribution, it does signal the kinds of experimentation that digital production and distribution allow and the inevitable changes and adjustments that will occur in the future in response to shifting markets, tastes, and technologies. The division between Nolan and Spielberg also suggests larger concerns about how these changes can affect our responses to films and the kinds of films that will be made.

Marketing and Promotion: What We Want to See

Marketing and promotion, which accompany distribution, shape why and how we are attracted to certain movies. A film might be advertised online as the work of a great director, for example, or it might be described as a steamy love story and illustrated with a sensational poster. A film trailer might emphasize the comedic aspect of an unusual or disturbing film like *The Lobster* (2016). Although these preliminary encounters with a film might seem marginally relevant to how we experience the film, promotional strategies, like distribution strategies, prepare us in important ways for how we will see and understand a film.

VIEWING CUE

Name a movie you believe has had a strong cultural and historical influence. Investigate what modes of promotion helped highlight particular themes in and reactions to the film.

The terminology used to define and promote a movie can become a potent force in framing our expectations. In the first part of the twentieth century, the Hollywood studios marketed films according to a production distinction between an **A picture**, a feature film with

a large budget and prestigious source material or actors that has been historically promoted as a main attraction receiving top billing, and a **B picture**, a low-budget, nonprestigious movie that usually played on the bottom half of a double bill. Today, the term **blockbuster** (a big-budget film intended for wide release, whose large investment in stars, special effects, and advertising attracts large audiences and big profits) prepares us for action, stars, and special effects; and the term **art film** (a film produced primarily for aesthetic rather than commercial or entertainment purposes, whose intellectual or formal challenges are often attributed to the vision of an auteur) suggests a more visually subtle, perhaps slower-paced or more intellectually demanding movie.

FILM IN FOCUS Distributing *Killer of Sheep* (1977)

See also: *Bless Their Little Hearts* (1983); *Daughters of the Dust* (1991)

FILM IN FOCUS
LaunchPad

To watch a clip from *Killer of Sheep* (1977), go to LaunchPad for *The Film Experience* at **launchpadworks.com**

Distribution is almost invisible to the public and hence much less glamorous than film production or exhibition, but it determines whether a film will ever reach an audience. Independent filmmakers often bring new perspectives to mainstream, formulaic filmmaking, but their visions need to be shared. African American

filmmakers, who have historically been marginalized within the industrial system of production, often encounter additional challenges in getting their films distributed. The career of Charles Burnett, considered one of the most significant African American filmmakers despite his relatively small oeuvre, is marked by the vicissitudes of distribution. The successful limited release of his first feature, *Killer of Sheep* (1977), in 2007 — more than thirty years after it was made — not only illuminates black American filmmakers' historically unequal access to movie screens but also illustrates the multiple levels on which current distribution campaigns function. The way the film's distributor, Milestone Films, handled the film's theatrical, nontheatrical, and DVD release in order to maximize critical attention and gain significant revenue serves as a model for similar endeavors [**Figure 1.14**].

1.14 ***Killer of Sheep*** (1977). Charles Burnett's legendary independent film about an African American family in Los Angeles's Watts neighborhood infuses its realism with

poetic images, like the child wearing a mask. The film was finally distributed theatrically thirty years after it was made.

Produced in the early 1970s as a master's thesis film, Burnett's *Killer of Sheep* emerged amid a flowering of African American filmmaking talent at the University of California, Los Angeles, film school. In place of the two-dimensional stereotypes of past classical Hollywood films, the almost-too-good-to-be-true characters played by Sidney Poitier in the 1960s, or the often cartoonish, street-wise characters of the low-budget **blaxploitation** films that Burnett saw on urban screens in the early 1970s, he depicted his protagonist, Stan, as the father of a black family living in the impoverished Watts neighborhood in Los Angeles. A decent man whose slaughterhouse job and daily struggles have numbed and depressed him, Stan nevertheless gets by, and his bonds with his family and community, depicted in grainy, beautifully composed black-and-white images, are profoundly moving. In one poignant scene, Stan and his wife slow dance to a song by Dinah Washington, getting through another day.

Killer of Sheep was never distributed theatrically before its restoration. Essential to the mood and meaning of the film is its soundtrack, composed of blues and rhythm and blues music by Paul Robeson, Dinah Washington, and Earth, Wind & Fire. Without the resources to clear the music rights for public presentation, Burnett circulated his film over the years in occasional festivals and museum and educational settings. His artistic reputation became firmly established. In 1990, the film was among the first fifty titles named to the National Film Registry by the Library of Congress. But audiences never got to see the film. Only when Burnett was able to complete *To Sleep with Anger* in 1990, due to the participation of actor Danny Glover and Burnett's receipt of a prestigious MacArthur Fellowship, did one of his films receive theatrical distribution. But even *To Sleep with Anger*, a family drama that lacked violence and clear resolutions, was overlooked amid the media's attention to more sensationalized depictions of ghetto culture set to hip-hop soundtracks, such as John Singleton's *Boyz N the Hood* (1991).

Eventually, Burnett's critical reputation helped secure the restoration of *Killer of Sheep* by the UCLA Film & Television Archive just when its original 16mm elements were in danger of disintegrating beyond repair. The restoration, one of several planned for independent films of historical significance, was funded by Turner Classic Movies and filmmaker Steven Soderbergh, whose own debut feature, *sex, lies, and videotape* (1989), changed the landscape for the distribution of independent film.

In March 2007, the specialty, or "boutique," distributor Milestone Films, whose founders (Dennis Doros and Amy Heller) have long been in the business of releasing important classic and contemporary films theatrically, opened *Killer of Sheep* in a restored 35mm print in New York. Excellent reviews positioned the film in relation to African American history, to filmmaking movements like **Italian neorealism** (a film movement that began in Italy during World War II and lasted until about 1952, depicting everyday social realities using location shooting and amateur actors), and to the grassroots support of the Harlem-based organization Imagenation. The film's opening was a record-breaking success, and it soon opened in art cinemas around the country.

The next phase was release on DVD to institutions such as universities that did not have the facilities to show *Killer of Sheep* on 35mm but wanted the rights to have a public screening. Later, the film was released on DVD for the consumer market, packaged with another unreleased early feature by Burnett, *My Brother's Wedding* (1983), along with a commentary track and other features. Thus, an experienced "niche" distributor helped a thirty-year-old film win a place on critics' top-ten lists, a special prize from the New York Film Critics Circle, and a place in public memory.

Generating Interest

Marketing and promotion aim to generate and direct interest in a movie. Film **marketing** identifies an audience for a specific product

(in this case, a movie) and brings the product to its attention for consumption so that buyers will watch the product. Film **promotion** refers to the aspect of the industry through which audiences are exposed to and encouraged to see a particular film. It includes advertisements, trailers, publicity appearances, and product tie-ins.

The **star system** is the most pervasive and potent component of the marketing and promotion of movies around the world. One or more well-known actors who are popular at a specific time and within a specific culture act as the advertising vehicle for the movie. The goal of the star system, like that of other marketing and promotional practices, is to create specific expectations that will draw an audience to a film. These marketing and promotional expectations — that Leonardo DiCaprio stars or that indie filmmaker Debra Granik directs, for example — often become the viewfinders through which an audience sees a movie.

The methods of marketing and promotion are many and creative. Viewers find themselves bombarded with newspaper and billboard advertisements, previews shown before the main feature, tie-in games featured on the official movie website, and trailers that appear when browsing social media. Stars make public appearances on radio and television talk shows and are profiled in fan magazines, and media critics attend early screenings and write reviews that are quoted in the ads for the film. All these actions contribute to movie promotion. In addition, although movies have long been promoted through prizes and gifts, modern distributors are especially adept at

marketing films through **tie-ins** — ancillary products (such as soundtracks, toys, games, and other gimmicks made available at stores and restaurants) that advertise and promote a movie. *Minions* (2015), for example, was anticipated with an extensive line of toys and games that generated interest in the movie and vice versa.

Marketing campaigns for blockbuster films have become more and more extensive since the 1990s, with the promotion budget equaling and often even exceeding the film's production budget. A marketing blitz of note accompanied *Independence Day* (1996). Given its carefully timed release to coincide with the Fourth of July holiday, following weeks of advertisements in newspapers and on television, it is difficult to analyze first-run viewers' feelings about this film without taking into account the influence of these promotions. Defining the film as a science fiction thriller, the advertisements and reviews drew attention to its status as the film event of the summer, its suitability for children, and its technological wizardry. Ads also emphasized the film's patriotic American themes **[Figure 1.15]**. In that light, many posters, advertisements, and publicity stills presented actor Will Smith together with Bill Pullman or Jeff Goldblum, not only to promote the film's stars but also to draw attention to the racial harmony portrayed in the film and to maximize its appeal to both African American and white audiences. During the first month of its release, when U.S. scientists discovered a meteorite with fossils that suggested early life on Mars, promotion for the movie responded immediately with revised ads: "Last week,

scientists found evidence of life on another planet. We're not going to say we told you so…." In contrast, the 2016 sequel *Independence Day: Resurgence* never found a strong marketing hook and made far less money twenty years later.

Photofest, Inc.

1.15 ***Independence Day*** (1996). The film's massive promotional campaign for its Fourth of July weekend opening drew on blatant and subtle forms of patriotism, such as the multicultural appeal of its cast.

Some Hollywood promotions and advertisements emphasize the realism of movies, a strategy that promises audiences more accurate or more expansive reflections of the world and human experience. In *Silver Linings Playbook* (2012), for example, the struggle of Bradley Cooper's character to cope with his bipolar disorder while living

with his Philadelphia family was a reality that the film's marketing claimed had rarely before been presented in movies. A related marketing strategy is to claim textual novelty in a film, drawing attention to new features such as technical innovations, a rising star, or the acclaimed book on which the film is based. With early sound films like *The Jazz Singer* (1927), *The Gold Diggers of Broadway* (1929), and *Innocents of Paris* (1929), advertisements directed audiences toward the abundance and quality of the singing and talking that added a dramatic new dimension to cinematic realism **[Figure 1.16]**. Today, promotions and advertisements frequently exploit new technologies. *Avatar*'s (2009) marketing campaign emphasized that the film was designed to be viewed in theaters with cutting-edge three-dimensional (3-D) technology. Marketers also can take advantage of current political events, as when they advertised the plot of Kathryn Bigelow's *Detroit* (2017) — which tells the story of the racial riots in Detroit, Michigan, during the summer of 1967 — by evoking its relevance amid contemporary racial tensions in the United States, such as the unrest in Ferguson, Missouri, in 2014 **[Figure 1.17]**.

1.16 ***Innocents of Paris*** (1929). The marquee for the movie promotes the novelty of sound and song and this early musical's singing star.

1.17 *Detroit* (2017). As with her other films, Kathryn Bigelow's *Detroit* addresses topical issues that engage contemporary audiences — in this case, debates about race and police tactics.

As official promotion tactics, stars are booked to appear on talk shows and in other venues in conjunction with a film's release, but they may also bring unofficial publicity to a film. Brad Pitt and Angelina Jolie boosted audiences for the film *Mr. and Mrs. Smith* (2005) when they became a couple during its filming. Conversely, unwelcome publicity can cause an actor's contract to be canceled or raise concerns about the publicity's effect on ticket sales. Mel Gibson, for example, encountered difficulty finding big-studio work in Hollywood after his well-publicized personal troubles starting in 2006.

Independent, art, revival, and foreign-language films have less access to the mechanisms of promotion than do current mainstream films, but social media have afforded new opportunities for

filmmakers and distributors to spread the word to specialized audiences. In addition, audiences for these films are led to some extent by what we might call "cultural promotion" — academic or journalistic accounts that discuss and value films as aesthetic objects or as especially important in movie history. A discussion of a movie in a film history book or a university film course thus could be seen as an act of marketing, which confirms that promotion is about urging viewers not just to see a film but also to see it with a particular point of view. Although these more measured kinds of promotion are usually underpinned by intellectual rather than financial motives, they also deserve our consideration and analysis.

How does a specific film history text, for instance, prepare you to see a film such as *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967)? Some books promote it as a modern gangster film. Others pitch it as an incisive reflection of the social history of the turbulent 1960s. Still other texts and essays may urge readers to see it because of its place in the oeuvre of a major U.S. director, Arthur Penn **[Figure 1.18]**. Independent movies promote the artistic power and individuality of the director; associate themselves with big-name film festivals in Venice, Toronto, and Cannes; or call attention, through advertising, to what distinguishes them from mainstream Hollywood films. For a foreign film, a committed publicist who attracts critics' attention can play a crucial role in attaining distribution. Documentaries can be promoted in relation to topical or controversial subject matter. In

short, we do not experience any film with innocent eyes; consciously or not, we come prepared to see it in a certain way.

1.18 ***Bonnie and Clyde*** (1967). Critical accounts may position this film as an updated gangster film or as social commentary on the turbulent 1960s.

Advertising

Advertising is a central form of promotion that uses television, billboards, film trailers or previews, print ads, images and videos on websites and social media, and other forms of display to bring a film to the attention of a potential audience. Advertising often emphasizes connections with and differences from related or similar films or highlights a particularly popular actor or director. The poster for Charlie Chaplin's *The Kid* (1921), for example, proudly

pronounces that it is “the great Film he has been working on for a whole year” **[Figure 1.19]**. For different markets, *Prometheus* (2012) was promoted as a star vehicle for Sweden’s Noomi Rapace or as the latest film from Ridley Scott, the director of *Alien* (1979), *Blade Runner* (1982), *Thelma & Louise* (1991), and *Black Hawk Down* (2001). It is conceivable that these two promotional tactics created different sets of expectations about *Prometheus* — one more attuned to tough female protagonists and the other to lavish sets and technological landscapes. As this example reveals, promotion tends both to draw us to a movie and to suggest what we will concentrate on as a way of understanding its achievement.

Everett Collection, Inc.

1.19 ***The Kid*** (1921). Unlike posters for his well-known slapstick comedies, this poster shows Charlie Chaplin displaying a demeanor that suggests the serious themes of his first feature film.

Description
The poster shows an illustration of Charlie Chaplin holding a kid in his arms. The text below reads, "Charles Chaplin in 'The Kid' Written and directed by Charles Chaplin, 6 reels of joy, This is the great film he has been working on for a whole year, A first national attraction.

Trailers

One of the most carefully crafted forms of promotional advertising is the **trailer** — a short video that previews edited images and scenes from a film in theaters before the main feature film, in television commercials, or online. In just a few minutes, the trailer provides a compact series of reasons why a viewer should see that movie. A trailer for Stanley Kubrick's *Eyes Wide Shut* (1999) is indicative of this form of advertising: it moves quickly to large bold titles announcing separately the names of Tom Cruise, Nicole Kidman, and Kubrick, foregrounding the collaboration of a star marriage and a celebrated director of daring films. Then, against the refrain from Chris Isaak's soundtrack song "Baby Did a Bad Bad Thing," a series of images condenses the progress of the film, including shots of Kidman undressing, Cruise sauntering with two beautiful women, the two stars sharing a passionate kiss, two ominous-looking men standing

at the gate of an estate, and Cruise being enticed by a prostitute. Besides the provocative match of two then-married star sex symbols with a controversial director, the trailer underlines the dark erotic mysteries of the film within an opulently decadent setting. It introduces intensely sexual characters and the alternately seedy and glamorous atmosphere of the film in a manner meant to draw fans of Cruise, Kidman, Kubrick, and erotic intrigue **[Figure 1.20]**. That this promotion fails to communicate the stinging irony in the movie's eroticism may account for some of the disappointed reactions that followed its eager initial reception. The availability of trailers on the internet has increased the novel approaches to this format, and trailers are now rated and scrutinized like theatrical releases.

1.20 ***Eyes Wide Shut*** (1999). Advertisements and trailers for Stanley Kubrick's last film emphasized the film's director, its stars — Tom Cruise and Nicole Kidman, who were married at the time — and its sexual content.

TECHNOLOGY IN ACTION

The Changing Technologies of Film Promotion

The history of cinema is, in part, a history of changing technologies, and the art and business of film promotion and marketing have continually changed over time along with those technologies. In the first decades of the twentieth century, the movies moved rapidly from a vaudevillian novelty to an important institution within the cultural mainstream. Supporting this cultural shift, traditional print

media (including newspapers, posters, and fan magazines) began to celebrate new films and stars as a part of a new and exciting literacy, a way of seeing the world in tune with the energies of the emerging twentieth century. *Photoplay* magazine appeared in 1911, just as the Hollywood star system was beginning to emerge as a major promotional strategy. This magazine attracted passionate readers and moviegoers to stories about upcoming films and about the public and private lives of directors and actors. Such publications broadened the reach of film promotion to the growing middle class and assimilated the new film arts into literary and journalistic media, bridging a cultural past and a cultural present **[Figure 1.21a]**.

Transcendental Graphics/Archive Photos/Getty Images.

1.21a *Photoplay* magazine cover (February 1931). Magazines and newspapers welcomed the new art of cinema through traditional journalistic vehicles.

Description

The cover shows a woman with soft blonde curls, smiling. Text at the top reads, The National Guide to Motion pictures. The magazine title below reads, Photoplay. The month below reads, February, along with price, 25 cents. Text to the left of the woman reads, Earl Christy, and another text to the right of the woman reads, Dorothy Mackaill. Text at the bottom left reads, Garbo versus Dietrich, The battle is on! Text at the bottom right reads, Goofy Genius in Hollywood.

As promotional technologies expanded through the mid-twentieth century to include radio and television, film studios immediately took advantage of the broad markets reached by these outlets. As audio and visual media, radio and television allowed potential audiences to see and hear the actors, music, and images being promoted in advance of the films themselves. For instance, a ninety-second radio ad for *Superman the Movie* (1978) alternated between voiceover narration quoting the praise of critics ("a super hit!"), the film's musical score, and pieces of lively dialogue ("the problem with men of steel is that there's never one around when you want one"). Both radio and television became ubiquitous promotional vehicles that integrate sound and (in the case of television ads) images to draw viewers into theaters **[Figure 1.21b]**.

CBS Photo Archive/CBS/Getty Images.

1.21b Television promotion (1960). Television and radio made stars like Joan Collins (pictured here) come alive as a new form of promotion.

More recently, the internet brought another major technological change in film promotion. Today, many marketing campaigns encourage interactivity and direct involvement from potential viewers, teasing mysteries and unexpected surprises intended to boost word-of-mouth engagement. The pioneering example of internet marketing was *The Blair Witch Project* (1999), a low-budget horror film that generated excitement through an immersive viral campaign. Over several months prior to its release, the film's distributors released realistic "newsreel" footage online that made the plot of the film seem believable, to the point where potential

viewers actually debated whether the film was fiction or documentary. Due to its commercial and critical success, *The Blair Witch Project* has become a model for subsequent viral marketing campaigns, illustrating the extent to which promotional technologies impact our film experience [**Figure 1.21c**].

William Thomas Cain/Hulton Archive/Getty Images.

1.21c ***The Blair Witch Project*** (1999). Today the internet often makes promotion part of an interactive engagement with viewers.

Description

Text below the woman's photo reads, Heather Donahue, Age: 22, Height: 5 feet 6 inches, Weight: 127 l b, Eyes: Hazel and Hair: Brown. Text below a man's photo reads, Joshua Leonard, Age: 23, Height: 5 feet 10 inches, Weight: 152 l b, Eyes: Blue, and Hair: Blonde. Text below another man's photo reads, Michael Williams, Age: 24, Height: 5 feet 8 inches, Weight: 169 l b, Eyes: Brown and Hair: brown.

Text below photo text reads, last seen camping in the Black Hills Forest area, near Burkitsville. Please call Frederick county sheriff's office with any

information you may have! (301)

Media Convergence

Today, movie advertising and marketing has adapted strategies of **media convergence** — the process by which formerly distinct media (such as cinema, television, the internet, and video games) and viewing platforms (such as television, computers, and cell phones) have become interdependent. A viewer might find and play an online game set in a film's fictional world on the film's website, read a comic-book tie-in, and watch an online promotion with the films' stars, all before viewing the movie in a theater. The enormous sums spent on marketing a film's theatrical release are deemed worthwhile because they relate directly to the promotion of other media elements within the brand or franchise, such as video games, books, toys, music, and DVD releases. Viewers understand these tactics and may participate in this convergence: a viewer who enjoys a film and its soundtrack might download a ringtone for her phone and buy the special edition on Blu-ray months later. But viewers may also decide to skip the theatrical release altogether and catch the film later on video on demand or DVD.

VIEWING CUE

LaunchPad

Go to **launchpadworks.com** to watch a clip of the trailer for *Suicide Squad* (2016). What kinds of messages does the trailer send about the film and its tone?

The enormous popularity of social media has fostered the technique of **viral marketing** — a process of advertising that relies on existing social networks to spread a marketing message by word of mouth, social media posts, or other means. Because viral marketing works through networks of shared interest, it is less dependent than conventional promotional techniques on market research and can be a highly effective and informative indicator of audience preferences. Yet it is also less easily controlled than deliberately placed ads that are based on target demographics. In many ways, media convergence has allowed today's viewers to affect how films are understood and produced more than viewers did in years past.

The Rating System

Rating systems, which provide viewers with guidelines for movies (usually based on violent or sexual content), are also used in marketing and promotion. Whether they are wanted or unwanted by viewers, ratings are fundamentally about trying to control the kind of audience that sees a film and, in some cases, about advertising the content of that film.

In the United States, the current Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA) ratings system classifies movies as G (general audiences), PG (parental guidance suggested), PG-13 (parental guidance suggested and not recommended for audiences under thirteen years old), R (persons under age seventeen must be accompanied by an adult), and NC-17 (persons under age seventeen are not admitted). Films made outside the major studios are not required to obtain MPAA ratings, but exhibition and even advertising opportunities are closely tied to the system.

Other countries, as well as some religious organizations, have their own systems for rating films. Great Britain, for instance, uses these categories: U (universal), A (parental discretion), AA (persons under age fourteen are not admitted), and X (persons under age eighteen are not admitted). The age limit for X-rated films varies from country to country, the lowest being age fifteen in Sweden.

As a film is being produced and then marketed, the studio and producers usually have a specific desired MPAA rating in mind to maximize the film's audience and revenues. A project like *The*

Peanuts Movie (2015), an animated adaptation of the famous comic strip, depends on its G rating to draw large family audiences, whereas sexually explicit films like Steve McQueen's *Shame* (2011, rated NC-17) and Nagisa Oshima's *In the Realm of the Senses* (1976, not rated and confiscated when it first came to many countries) can use the notoriety of their ratings to attract curious adult viewers. An NC-17 rating can damage a film's box-office prospects, however, because many outlets will not advertise such films. Many mainstream movies eagerly seek out a middle ground. Movies like *Ghostbusters* (2016) prefer a PG-13 rating because it attracts a young audience of eight-, nine-, and ten-year-olds who want movies with some adult language and action, as well as adult audiences who are drawn by the film's cast of well-known comedic actors and who may be fans of the original *Ghostbusters* (1984) **[Figure 1.22]**.

1.22 ***Ghostbusters*** (2016). A PG-13 rating can suggest a certain edge to a film that makes it attractive to preteens without alienating older viewers.

Word of Mouth and Fan Engagement

Our experiences when viewing a movie are shaped in advance in less evident and predictable ways as well. Word of mouth — the oral or written exchange of opinions and information sometimes referred to as the "buzz" around a movie — may seem insignificant or vague, yet our likes and dislikes are formed and given direction by the social groups we move in. Social media, which allow us to list or indicate our likes and dislikes with a click, have expanded these social groups exponentially. We know that our friends like certain kinds of films, and we tend to enjoy and promote movies according to the values of our particular age group, cultural background, and other social determinants. When marketing experts promote a movie to a target audience, they do so in ways that will maximize word-of-mouth or "viral" communication, knowing that viewers recommend films to people who share their values and tastes [Figure 1.23].

1.23 ***Titanic*** (1997). Word of mouth anticipating the release of James Cameron's film focused on special effects. After the film's release, word of mouth among young female fans was appreciative of its star Leonardo DiCaprio and its romance plot.

Consider, for instance, how friends who enjoyed the novel might have discussed the making of the film *The Hunger Games* (2012). Would they be excited about the casting of rising star Jennifer Lawrence as the tough young heroine? About the genre of science fiction films set in a dystopian future and the potential for interesting visual effects? About other books by Suzanne Collins with which they are familiar? What would each of these word-of-mouth promotions indicate about the social or personal values of the person promoting the movie and the culture of taste influencing his or her views?

Fan magazines were an early extension of word of mouth as a form of movie promotion and have consistently shed light on the sociology of taste. Emerging in the 1910s and widely popular by the 1920s, such "fanzines" brought film culture home to audience members. Posing as objective accounts, many stories were actually produced by the studios' publicity departments. Today, in place of print fanzines, we have social media as well as internet discussion groups, promotional and user-generated websites, conventions, and other fan activities, which have become an even bigger force in film promotion and culture. Social media are the most powerful contemporary form of fan engagement, allowing information about and enthusiasm for a movie to be efficiently exchanged and spread

among potential viewers. Even before the proliferation of social media, online discussion boards allowed film fans to discuss upcoming releases. Notoriously, the title *Snakes on a Plane* (2006) was so resonant with viewers in its very literalness that online activity around the film (even before its release) prompted changes to make the film more daring and campier. The subsequent box-office disappointment may have been a measure of viewers' reaction to marketing manipulations.

VIEWING CUE

Consider a recent film release that you've seen, and identify which promotional strategies were effective in persuading you to watch it. Was anything about the promotion misleading? Was there anything about the film you feel was ignored or underplayed in the promotion?

Promotional avenues from fanzines to social media deserve attention and analysis to try to determine how they add to or confuse our understanding of a film. Our different experiences of the movies take place within a complex cultural terrain where our personal interest in certain films intersects with specific historical and social forces to shape the meaning and value of those experiences. Here, too, the film experience extends well beyond the big screen.

Movie Exhibition: The Where, When, and How of Movie Experiences

Exhibition is the part of the industry that shows films to a paying public, traditionally in movie theaters. It may involve promotional elements like movie posters and publicity events in a theater lobby or may be related to distribution through the calendar of film releasing. But exhibition, which is closely tied to **reception** — the process through which individual viewers or groups make sense of a film — is at the heart of the traditional film experience. **Exhibitors** own individual theaters or theater chains and make decisions about programming and local promotion. They are responsible for the actual experience of moviegoing, including the concessions that make a night out at the movies different from one spent watching films at home and that bring in an estimated 40 percent of theater owners' revenue. Like distribution and promotion, we may take exhibition for granted, forgetting that the many ways we watch movies contribute a great deal to our feelings about, and our interpretations of, film. We watch movies within a cultural range of exhibition venues — in theaters, at home on video monitors, or on a plane or train on portable devices. Not surprisingly, these contexts and technologies anticipate and condition our responses to movies.

The Changing Contexts and Practices of Film Exhibition

Very different responses can be elicited by seeing the same movie at a cineplex or in a college classroom or by watching it uninterrupted for two hours on a big screen or in thirty-minute segments over four days on a computer. A viewer watching a film on an airplane monitor may be completely bored by it, but watching it later at home, he or she may find the film much more compelling and appreciate its visual surprises and interesting plot twists.

Movies have been distributed, exhibited, and seen in many different contexts historically. At the beginning of the twentieth century, movies rarely lasted more than twenty minutes and often were viewed in small, noisy **nickelodeons** — storefront theaters or arcade spaces where short films were shown continuously for a five-cent admission price to audiences passing in and out — or in carnival settings that assumed movies were a passing amusement comparable to other attractions. By the 1920s, as movies grew artistically, financially, and culturally, the exhibition of films moved to lavish **movie palaces** like Radio City Music Hall in New York City (which opened in 1932), with sumptuous seating for thousands amid ornate architecture. By the 1950s, city centers gave way to suburban sprawl, movie palaces lost their crowds of patrons, and drive-ins and widescreen and 3-D processes were introduced to distinguish the possibilities of theatrical exhibition from its new rival, television at

home. Soon television became a way to experience movies as special events in the flow of daily programming. In the 1980s, VCRs gave home audiences access to many movies and the ability to watch them when and how they wished. At the same time, the **multiplex**, a movie theater complex with many screens, became increasingly important as a way to integrate a choice of moviegoing experiences with an outing to the mall.

Today we commonly view movies at home on a TV or computer screen, where we can watch them in the standard ninety-to 120-minute period, extend our viewing over many nights, or rewatch favorite or puzzling portions of them. Portable devices such as laptops, smartphones, and tablets give mobility to our viewing. As theaters continue to compete with home screens, film exhibitors have countered with so-called megaplexes — massive versions of grand exhibition spaces that began with the movie palaces of the 1920s, now with twenty or more screens, more than six thousand seats, and over a hundred showtimes per day. New entertainment complexes may feature not just movies but also arcade games, restaurants, and coffee bars. One such complex is the Alamo Drafthouse Theater, a chain known for serving food and drinks to viewers during film screenings. Home exhibition has responded with more elaborate digital picture and sound technologies and convergence between devices such as game consoles and smart TVs for streaming movies.

Technologies and Cultures of Exhibition

Viewing forums — the locations where we watch a movie — contribute to the wider culture of exhibition space and the social activities that surround and define moviegoing. Theatrical exhibition highlights a social dimension of watching movies because it gathers and organizes individuals as a specific audience at a specific place and time. Further, our shared participation in that social environment directs our attention and shapes our responses.

A movie such as *Zootopia* (2016) will be shown as a Saturday matinee in suburban theaters (as well as other places) to attract families with children to its talking-animal adventure **[Figure 1.24]**. The time and place of the showing coordinate with a period when families can share recreation, making them more inclined to appreciate this empowering tale of societal harmony and self-confidence. Conversely, *The Room* (2003), a cult film about a love triangle that rambles through unrelated subplots and has sometimes been deemed the worst movie ever made, is frequently shown in art houses for midnight audiences. This movie appeals to an urban crowd with experimental and ironic tastes and to those who appreciate marginal films **[Figure 1.25]**. Reversing the exhibition contexts of these two films would indicate how those contexts could generate wildly different reactions.

1.24 ***Zootopia*** (2016). Family films are distributed widely to theater chains and exhibited in early time slots, although some become crossover hits.

1.25 ***The Room*** (2003). Cult films and other marginal movies tend to find their audiences at small theaters that cultivate late-night viewers who come equipped with a taste for the bizarre.

The technological conditions of exhibition — that is, the industrial and mechanical vehicles through which movies are shown — shape the viewer's reaction as well, with screen sizes and locations varying widely from experience to experience. Different technological features are sometimes carefully calculated to add to both our enjoyment and our understanding of a movie. Cecil B. DeMille's epic film *The Ten Commandments* (1923) premiered in a movie palace, where the plush and grandiose surroundings, the biblical magnitude of the images, and the orchestral accompaniment supported the grand spiritual themes of the film. Thus, the conditions for watching a film may parallel its ideas or formal practices. With the special projection techniques and 3-D glasses worn for *Creature from the Black Lagoon* (1954), the creature's appearance becomes even more startling. 3-D technology is an excellent example of changing exhibition technologies and cultures **[Figure 1.26]**. Long regarded nostalgically as a gimmick of the 1950s, it made a comeback with new digital production and exhibition technologies in the 2000s, reaching its peak with *Avatar* (2009). Theater owners worldwide converted screens to 3-D in order to show the film and to attract local audiences with the novelty of the spectacle. Partially as a result of 3-D viewing, digital projection is now more prevalent than 35mm film.

Bettmann/Getty Images.

1.26 3-D exhibition. Viewers enjoy a screening with special 3-D glasses in the 1950s, the first heyday of the technology. As a technological innovation, 3-D brings the focus to exhibition contexts and offers a chance for theater owners to increase revenue.

In contrast to viewing technologies that attempt to enhance the spectacular nature of the big-screen experience are those that try to maximize (sometimes by literally minimizing) the uniquely personal encounter with the film image. Consumers have adapted quickly as distinct media (such as cinema, television, the internet, and video games) and viewing platforms (such as television, computers, and smartphones) have become commercially, technologically, and culturally interdependent.

The Timing of Exhibition

Consider how viewing the movie you most recently watched in class on a large screen versus a laptop would affect your response.

Whereas distribution timing determines when a film is made available and in what format, the timing of exhibition is a more personal dimension of the movie experience. When and for how long we watch a film can shape how it affects us and what our attitude toward it is as much as where we see the film and with whom. Although it is common to see movies in the early evening, either before or after dinner, audiences watch movies of different kinds according to numerous rituals and in various time slots. Afternoon matinees, midnight movies, or in-flight movies on long plane rides give some indication of how the timing of a movie experience can vary and how that can influence other considerations about the movie. In each of these situations, our experience of the movies includes a commitment to spend time in a certain way. Instead of spending time reading, talking with others, sleeping, or working on a business project, we watch a movie. That time spent with a movie accordingly becomes an activity associated with relaxing, socializing, or even working in a different way.

FILM IN FOCUS Exhibiting *Citizen Kane* (1941)

FILM IN FOCUS

LaunchPad

To watch a clip from *Citizen Kane* (1941), go to LaunchPad for *The Film Experience* at **launchpadworks.com**

The tale of a man obsessed with power and possessions, *Citizen Kane* (1941) is often considered one of the greatest films ever made. It is usually hailed for Orson Welles's portrayal of Charles Foster Kane, Welles's direction of the puzzle-like story, and the film's complex visual compositions. It also is a movie that ran into trouble even before its release because of its thinly disguised and critical portrayal of U.S. media mogul William Randolph Hearst **[Figure 1.27]**. Less often is *Citizen Kane* seen and understood according to its dramatic exhibition history, one that has colored or even decided the changing meanings of the film.

1.27 *Citizen Kane* (1941). William Randolph Hearst objected to the film's thinly veiled portrayal of his life and blocked it from opening at Radio City Music Hall. The film's wider release was negatively affected as well. Major theater chains did not want to screen it for fear of incurring Hearst's wrath.

As the first film of a twenty-five-year-old director already hailed as a "boy genius" for his work as a theater actor and director, *Citizen Kane* was scheduled to open with appropriate fanfare at the spectacular Radio City Music Hall in New York City, where RKO premiered its top films. Besides highlighting the glamorous and palatial architecture of this building, exhibiting the film in New York first would take advantage of the fact that Welles's career and reputation had been made there. The physical and social context for this opening exhibition would combine the epic grandeur of the Radio City building and a New York cultural space attuned to Welles's artistic experimentation. Already offended by rumors about the film, however, Hearst secretly moved to block the opening at Radio City Music Hall. After many difficulties and delays, the film's producer and distributor, RKO, eventually premiered the film simultaneously at an independent theater in Los Angeles and at a refurbished vaudeville house in New York City.

The film's wider release was detrimentally affected by Hearst's attack on the film. Hearst newspapers were banned from running ads for it, directly affecting its box-office potential. When major theaters such as the Fox and Paramount chains were legally forced to exhibit the film, they sometimes booked *Citizen Kane* but did not actually screen it for fear of vindictive repercussions from Hearst. Where it was shown, the controversy overshadowed the film itself, making it appear for many audiences strange and unnecessarily confrontational, resulting in a box-office failure.

Changing sociological and geographical contexts for exhibition have continued to follow *Citizen Kane* as its reputation has grown through the years. After its tumultuous first exhibition in the United States, the film was rediscovered in the 1950s by the art-house cinemas of France. There it was hailed as a brilliantly creative expression of film language. Today many individuals who see *Citizen Kane* watch it in a classroom — in a college course on American cinema, for example. In

the classroom, we look at movies as students or as scholars, and we are prepared to study them. In this context, viewers may feel urged to think more about the film as an art object than as entertainment or exposé. In the classroom, we may focus more on the serious aspects of the film (such as Kane's real and visual alienation from his best friends) than on the comic interludes (such as the vaudevillian dance number).

Someone watching *Citizen Kane* in an academic situation can see and think about it in other ways, but exhibition contexts suggest certain social attitudes through which we watch a movie. The exhibition history of *Citizen Kane* likewise describes significant differences in how the film is experienced through different technologies. Its original 35mm exhibition showed off the imagistic details and stunning deep-focus cinematography that made the film famous. The visual magnitude of scenes such as Susan Alexander's operatic premiere and Kane's safari picnic at Xanadu or the spatial vibrancy and richness of Kane and Susan's conversation in one of Xanadu's vast halls arguably require the size and texture of a large theatrical image.

Since its first theatrical exhibition, the film has circulated to film societies and colleges on 16mm film and later appeared on the successive consumer technologies of video, laserdisc, DVD, and Blu-ray. The content of the film remains the same, but the different technologies have sometimes muted the visual power of its images and scenes because of lower quality or smaller image size. Digital formats enhance the image, perhaps redirecting our understanding to visual dynamics rather than the events of the story.

The shift in the exhibition context may also affect our level of concentration from focused to distracted attention. A viewing experience on television may be broken up because of commercials, and on a digital format we can affect the duration of the experience when we start and stop the movie ourselves. Whereas the large images in the theater may direct the viewer more easily to the play of light and dark as commentaries on the different characters, a DVD player might instead allow the viewer to replay dialogue in order to note levels of intonation or wordplay.

Consumer editions of *Citizen Kane* give viewers the added opportunity to supplement the film with rare photos, documents from the advertising campaign, commentaries by filmmaker Peter Bogdanovich and critic Roger Ebert, and a documentary, *The Battle over Citizen Kane* (1996), that describes the history of its script and its exhibition difficulties.

To whatever degree these supplemental materials come into play, it is clear that a DVD exhibition of *Citizen Kane* offers possibilities for significantly enriching an audience's experience of the film. Viewers taking advantage of these materials would conceivably watch *Citizen Kane* prepared and equipped with certain points of view. They might be attuned to Welles's creative innovation and influence on later filmmakers like Bogdanovich or interested in how the film recreates the connections between Hearst and Kane that are detailed in the documentary supplement. That the DVD provides material on "alternative ad campaigns" for the original release of the film even allows viewers to investigate the way different promotional strategies can direct their attention to certain themes and scenes.

The fame of *Citizen Kane* among critics as the best film ever made (remaining at the top of the *Sight and Sound* poll taken each decade since 1962 until 2012, when it dropped to number two) and its frequent invocation as the effort of a "boy wonder" contribute to yet another exhibition context. Fans post excerpts on the internet in video-sharing sites such as YouTube, and would-be filmmakers compare their efforts to Welles's or remix parts of his film, introducing new generations to the classic.

Leisure Time

VIEWING CUE

Think of a movie you've watched as a "leisure time" versus a "productive time" activity. How might the film be viewed differently in a classroom versus during a

long airplane flight? How might your film choice be affected by the timing and context in which you view the movie?

Traditionally, movie culture has emphasized film exhibition as leisure time, a time that is assumed to be less productive than time spent working and that reinforces assumptions about movies as the kind of enjoyment associated with play and pleasure. To some extent, leisure time is a relatively recent historical development. Since the nineteenth century, when motion pictures first appeared, modern society has aimed to organize experience so that work and leisure could be separated and defined in relation to each other. We generally identify leisure time as an "escape," "the relaxation of our mind and body," or "the acting out of a different self." Since the early twentieth century, movie exhibition has been associated with leisure time in these ways. Seeing a comedy on a Friday night promises relaxation at the end of a busy week. Playing a concert film on a DVD player while eating dinner may relieve mental fatigue. Watching a romantic film on television late at night may offer the passion missing from one's real life.

Productive Time

Besides leisure time, we can and should consider film exhibition as productive time — time used to gain information, material advantage, or knowledge. From the early years of the cinema, movies have been used to illustrate lectures or introduce audiences

to Shakespearean performances. Educational films like those shown in health classes or driver education programs are less glamorous versions of this function of film. Although less widely acknowledged as part of film exhibition, productive time continues to shape certain kinds of film exhibition. For a movie reviewer or film producer, an early morning screening may be about "financial value" because this use of time to evaluate a movie will presumably result in certain economic rewards. For another person, a week of films at an art museum represents "intellectual value" because it helps explain ideas about a different society or historical period. For a young American, an evening watching *Schindler's List* (1993) can be about "human value" because that film aims to make viewers more knowledgeable about the Holocaust and more sensitive to the suffering of other human beings.

The timing of exhibitions may frame and emphasize the film experience according to certain values. The Cannes Film Festival introduces a wide range of films and functions both as a business venue for buying and selling film and as a glamorous showcase for stars and parties. The May timing of this festival and its French Riviera location ensure that the movie experience will be about pleasure and the business of leisure time. In contrast, the New York Film Festival, featuring some of the same films, has a more intellectual or academic aura. It occurs in New York City during September and October, at the beginning of the academic year and

the calendars of arts organizations, which associates this experience of the movies more with artistic value and productive time.

Classroom, library, and museum exhibitions tend to emphasize understanding and learning as much as enjoyment. When students watch films in these kinds of situations, they are asked to attend to them somewhat differently from the way they may view films on a Friday night at the movies. They may watch more carefully, consider the films as part of historical or artistic traditions, and take notes as a logical part of this kind of exhibition. These conditions of film exhibition do not necessarily change the essential meaning of a movie, but in directing how we look at a film, they can certainly shade and even alter how we understand it. Exhibition asks us to engage and think about the film not as an isolated object but as part of the expectations established by the conditions in which we watch it.

Chapter 1 Review

SUMMARY

- Our film experience is influenced by processes that occur before we ever sit down to watch a movie: production, distribution, promotion, and exhibition. These processes shape our response, enjoyment, and understanding of a film.
- Film production is generally broken down into three stages: **preproduction, production** , and **postproduction**.
    - Preproduction describes activities that take place before the filming of a movie, including financing, screenwriting, casting, location scouting, storyboarding, costume design, set building, and so forth. Key personnel include **screenwriters, producers, casting directors, agents, art directors, set designers** , and **costume designers**.
    - Production typically refers to actual shooting of a film on sets or on locations. Key personnel for this stage include the **director, cinematographer** , actors, **production sound mixers, stunt coordinators, camera operators, grips** , electricians, carpenters, make-up artists, caterers, and other on-set assistants and crew members.
    - Postproduction refers to processes that occur after — and often also simultaneously with — principal production, including **editing, sound mixing** , and **special effects**.

- **Distribution** is the practice and means through which movies are placed in venues where audiences can see them. A distributor is a company that acquires the rights to a movie from the filmmakers or producers and then makes the film available to public audiences by renting or selling the film to theaters. Distributors also make films available in **ancillary markets**, which include network and cable television, video stores, and online streaming services.
- Film **marketing** involves identifying an audience in order to best bring a movie to the attention of viewers so that they will want to watch it. **Promotion** refers to the specific ways a movie can be made into an object that audiences will want to see. The most common marketing and promotional strategy involves the **star system**, in which one or more well-known actors serve as advertising vehicles for a film. Other promotional strategies include **trailers**, television ads, social media marketing, and tie-ins like toys and games. **Viral marketing** refers to any process of advertising that relies on existing social networks to generate word-of-mouth excitement.
- Film **exhibition** encompasses where, when, and how we watch movies. Throughout the twentieth century, most exhibition took place in movie theaters, from **movie palaces** to **multiplexes**. Over the last two decades, that has changed, and most exhibition now occurs on TVs and other devices in private homes. The social activity of watching a movie in a theater differs greatly from the much more independent activity of watching a movie at home, raising questions about what this shift means for the film experience.

KEY TERMS

production
credits
preproduction
narrative
screenwriter
treatment
screenplay
script doctor
producer
studio system
postproduction
executive producer
line producer
unit production manager
above-the-line expenses
below-the-line expenses
production values
casting director
agent
package-unit approach
location scout
production designer
art director
set decorator
costume designer
principal photography

film shoot
director
auteur
take
cinematographer
camera operator
production sound mixer
grip
dailies
selects
editing
sound editing
sound mixing
special effects
visual effects
green-screen technology
motion-capture technology
computer-generated imagery (CGI)
distribution
video on demand (VOD)
distributor
feature film
block booking
premiere
first-run theaters
wide release
saturation booking
limited release

platforming
exclusive release
ancillary markets
piracy
theatrical release window
day-and-date release
A picture
B picture
blockbuster
art film
marketing
promotion
blaxploitation
Italian neorealism
star system
tie-ins
trailer
media convergence
viral marketing
exhibition
reception
exhibitor
nickelodeon
movie palaces
multiplex

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CHAPTER 2 HISTORY AND HISTORIOGRAPHY
Hollywood and Beyond

Focus Features/Everett Collection

Three films retell a similar story at different points over nearly fifty years of film history — *All That Heaven Allows*, a Hollywood melodrama made in

1955 by German émigré director Douglas Sirk; *Ali: Fear Eats the Soul*, directed in 1974 by German filmmaker Rainer Werner Fassbinder; and *Far from Heaven*, made in 2002 by American independent Todd Haynes. The first, starring Rock Hudson and Jane Wyman in a romance between a middle-class widow and her gardener, is a glossy Technicolor tale of social prejudice in small-town USA. The second, concentrating on the love affair between an older cleaning woman and a young Arab worker, is a grittier story about age, race, class, and immigration in modern Germany. The third juxtaposes a husband's desire for men with his wife's developing interracial intimacy with their gardener, critiquing the facade of a typical 1950s family. Although these are very different films — a product of the Hollywood studio system, a low-budget film by an acclaimed German filmmaker of the 1970s, and an independent art-house film — they are deeply connected, an original and two remakes that use a central love story as social critique at a particular historical place and time. They represent threads in the rich tapestry of films past, which can be approached as a series of partial histories and particular viewpoints.

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Every year, Hollywood's greatest spectacle, the Academy Awards nominations and ceremony, attracts media attention and global audiences as Academy voters determine the "best" work in twenty-four categories. Interested viewers can watch marathons of previous

winners on cable television to educate themselves in the history of great movie art. But awards — perhaps especially the Oscars — can be influenced by a film's critical profile, genre, advertising campaign, production values, and the prominence of its personnel within the industry. Other influential lists of "greatest" films give top honors to Hollywood productions — *Citizen Kane* (1941), *Vertigo* (1958), *Singin' in the Rain* (1952), *The Searchers* (1956), for example — that were passed over for the Oscar for best picture in their time. Conversely, some Academy Award winners are not included on the Library of Congress's National Film Registry, a list of films of historical significance that admits additional films each year after a public nomination process. Looking only at Oscar winners is not the most unbiased or comprehensive approach to the global history of cinema; foreign-language films are grouped in one Academy Award category, to which each country is allowed to submit only a single film.

Movie history can take many shapes and forms beyond "best of " lists. How we look at film history is the product of certain formulas and models. For example, industrial histories look at the technologies, business practices, and policies that shape filmmaking and the distribution and exhibition of films. Social histories relate film genres, stars, and filmgoing habits to larger social contexts. Formal histories analyze prevalent stylistic choices. Genealogies look at how power relations operating during a certain period influence one particular historical development over another. In our

discussion of film history, we aim not only to present key facts, names, and events but also to direct attention to how history is written.

Since the first days of moving pictures, movies themselves have attempted to write history. The first movies, with their remarkable ability to present people and events as living images, began to record actual historical happenings (such as the 1900 Paris Exposition) and to re-create historical moments (such as the assassination of President William McKinley in 1901). Cinema quickly became one of the most common ways that people encounter the figures of the past. Some historical movies — such as the tale of the eighteenth-century Russian monarch Catherine the Great in *The Scarlet Empress* (1934), the story of John Reed and the Greenwich Village leftist movement in *Reds* (1981), and the 1965 voting rights march led by Martin Luther King Jr. and other civil rights leaders in *Selma* (2015) **[Figure 2.1]** — have so powerfully and convincingly reconstructed the past that they have become the dominant framework through which many of us see and understand history.

2.1 ***Selma*** (2015). History in the movies: David Oyelowo portrays Martin Luther King Jr. in Ava DuVernay's drama about a crucial moment in the U.S. civil rights era.

The study of the methods and principles through which the past is viewed according to certain perspectives and priorities is called **historiography**. Just as the movies construct visions of history for us, so, too, do written accounts shape our view of film history in particular ways. Attention to historiography gives us a broader perspective on the kinds of historical narratives available to us, allowing us to understand the many stories that constitute the movie past rather than to take a singular perspective as given.

It has been nearly 125 years since films were first exhibited to paying audiences, and those first exhibitions were the culmination of long efforts of invention and imagination. We have selected **periodization** as the most useful historiographic tool to give readers a broad overview of film history that can serve as background for the concepts to be introduced in the book. Periodization is a method

of organizing film history by periods that are defined by historical events or that produced movies that share thematic and stylistic concerns. Although different periodizations are possible, this survey is divided into the following broad periods — silent (1895–1929), classical (1929–1945), post–World War II (1945–1975), globalization (1975–2000), and digital (2000–present). For each era, we reference key social events that define film histories and highlight formal and stylistic features that are tied to industrial and technological developments.

Inevitably, writing film history involves interpretation and making choices about what to include and what to leave out. The commonly accepted list of great works in a field of study is called the **canon**. In this chapter, we introduce canonical films and filmmakers as an essential orientation to film history, while recognizing that the very concept of a film canon confers cultural weight on certain movies over others. We have therefore also highlighted undervalued contributions and traditions that help reveal the antecedents of some of today's diverse film practices and drive changes in the canon.

Although Hollywood has achieved a dominant economic and stylistic position in world film history, any view of film history would be incomplete if it ignored the rich traditions of filmmaking beyond Hollywood. Film arose as an international medium and in its first decades even transcended language barriers. A variety of factors internal and external to the film industry led to the rise of

Hollywood's storytelling and commercial models. This chapter examines film cultures from around the world — some as old as Hollywood and some just beginning to emerge — without attempting to be comprehensive.

This chapter concludes with attention to the issue of preserving our rich and diverse film history. The Film Foundation, founded by director Martin Scorsese, estimates that more than 50 percent of films made worldwide before 1950 are no longer extant. How can we tell the full story of cinema with this many gaps in the record? These losses encourage the writing of film histories that go beyond the films themselves to consider institutions like archives and practices like public memories of filmgoing.

Indeed, every aspect of the film experience can be weaved into the history of the medium. While this chapter offers a broad overview, later chapters also include historical material explaining technical and stylistic developments as well as the evolution of modes and genres of filmmaking.

KEY OBJECTIVES

- Draw the broad outlines and periods of film history.
- Introduce important films, filmmakers, and movements.
- Explain the concept of historiography as writing history from a particular viewpoint.
- Identify film practices and filmmakers marginalized by traditional Hollywood-centered histories.

- Give a sense of the global dimensions of film history, emphasizing the distinctive nature of different national traditions as well as transnational influences.
- Describe “lost” film history and the importance of film preservation.

Silent Cinema (1895–1929)

The silent cinema period, from 1895 until roughly 1929, was characterized by rapid development and experimentation in film technology, form, and culture and the establishment of successful film industries around the world. After World War I (1914–1918), Hollywood achieved dominance as it established the practices and formulas that carried into the classical period after the incorporation of synchronized sound technology. This period saw the development of the major film genres, the star system, the studio system, and the theatrical exhibition of feature-length narrative films.

Around the turn of the twentieth century in the United States, massive industrialization attracted large numbers of immigrants and rural Americans to urban centers, shifting traditional class, race, and gender lines as the country experienced economic prosperity. Industrialization also fostered the growth of leisure time and commercialized leisure activities, allowing popular culture to compete with high culture as never before. These patterns of modernization — including the invention of cinema and its rapid integration into the life of the masses — were, to some extent, international phenomena, also appearing most notably in Western Europe, Russia, and some Asian capitals.

For many historians, the beginning of cinema history proper is the first screening of August and Louis Lumière's *Workers Leaving the Lumière Factory* on March 22, 1895, followed by the public screening of this and other films by the brothers in Paris on December 18, 1895. Seeking the shock of the new, viewers in major cities around the world looked to see demonstrations of the new medium in films like Robert W. Paul's 1896 racing film *The Derby* **[Figure 2.2]**. Soon commercial and theatrical venues for showing movies to the general public arrived in the form of **nickelodeons** — storefront theaters and arcade spaces where short films were showed continuously for a five-cent admission price to audiences passing in and out. The early development of film technology, technique, subject matter, and exhibition practices took place on many fronts. In part to control this growth, the major film companies in the United States standardized practices by forming the Motion Picture Patents Company (known as "the Trust") in 1908.

2.2 ***The Derby*** (1896). The finish of the annual Epsom Derby horse race, captured by British filmmakers Robert W. Paul and Birt Acres, stands at the beginning of cinema's evolution.

This period of rapid change in how films were made and seen is known as **early cinema**, which stretches from 1895 to the rise of the feature film form around 1915. In early cinema, the impulse was less to tell a story than to provide an exciting spectacle for audiences. The first movies encompassed trick films, comic sketches, travelogues, and scenes of everyday life. Stylistically, early cinema was characterized by the shift from single to multiple shots and the early elaboration of narrative form. From simple scenes like *Fred Ott's Sneeze* (1896), movies quickly evolved to dramatize real or

fictional events using multiple shots that were logically connected in space and time. Released in 1903, Edwin S. Porter's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* presented fourteen shots introduced by intertitles to depict the highlights of the famous novel and play. By 1911, D. W. Griffith's *The Lonedale Operator*, a short film about burglars threatening a telegraph operator, used around one hundred shots and parallel editing to build suspense. The kind of cutting and variations in camera distance that Griffith employed eventually characterized the influential American narrative style, whereas narrative styles in other film-producing countries like Denmark and Russia relied on a more presentational, tableau format.

The early film era was an entrepreneurial period that attracted women caught up in rapid changes in gender roles and expectations. Although they have only recently been restored to the historical record, women participated as directors and producers as well as assistants, writers, editors, and actors. Alice Guy Blaché made what some consider the first fiction film, *La fée aux choux* (*The Cabbage Fairy*) in 1896 in France and later turned out hundreds of films from her New Jersey studio **[Figure 2.3]**. Lois Weber, a director in the 1910s who was nearly as well-known as fellow filmmakers Cecil B. DeMille and D. W. Griffith, made a film about birth control, *Where Are My Children?* (1916) **[Figure 2.4]**, and at least eleven women were credited with directing movies at Universal in the 1910s. As the Hollywood mode of production began to solidify in the 1920s, all of these women were driven out of the industry.

2.3 ***Alice Guy Blaché in 1915*****.** The earliest and most prolific woman director in history has barely been acknowledged in mainstream film histories.

2.4 ***Where Are My Children?*** (1916). This film by Lois Weber deals with the controversial social issues of birth control and abortion.

Description
A man seated on a chair points to a woman kneeling on the floor. The woman's body faces away from the man as she looks over her should, raising a hand, and crying out.

Another sign of the promise of filmmaking before the standard practices and economic interests of the studio system pushed out different approaches can be seen in early African American film culture. In the first decades of the twentieth century, black

filmmakers like Oscar Micheaux (see the History Close Up later in this chapter), produced work for African American audiences confronting the realities of racism and segregation. Opposition to the inflammatory depictions of blacks in Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) was a significant impetus for African Americans to claim film as a medium for self-representation. So-called **race movies** — early-twentieth-century films that featured all–African American casts — were circulated to African American audiences, sometimes at segregated, late-night screenings known as "midnight rambles." Some race movies were produced by white entrepreneurs, but several prominent production companies were owned by African Americans. In 1910, for example, Bill Foster founded the Foster Photoplay Company in Chicago, and in 1916, actor Noble Johnson formed the all-black Lincoln Motion Picture Company in Los Angeles with his brother and other partners.

Throughout the 1910s, French and American studios churned out films for export in genres including slapstick comedy and literary adaptations. The characters in these short films were originally anonymous actors and actresses, but the emergence of the star system enhanced the cultural power of film. By 1911, Biograph Studios' most popular actress, Florence Lawrence, was known as the "Biograph Girl," and celebrities like Mary Pickford ("America's Sweetheart") became the focus of wildly popular fan magazines and collectables. In Japan, film production flourished, and a unique film culture developed, with storytellers called **benshi** who narrated and

interpreted silent films. In the 1910s, epic films produced in Italy challenged the standards of film length set in the United States by the Trust, which was finally dissolved in 1918. American movie production advanced in length and complexity, and Hollywood extended its reach around the world, producing half the films made worldwide in 1914 on the cusp of World War I.

Silent Features in Hollywood

Hollywood came of age with three major historical developments — the standardization of film production, the establishment of the feature film, and the cultural and economic expansion of movies throughout society. As the industry grew, standardized formulas for film production took root, and the studios created efficient teams of scriptwriters, producers, directors, camera operators, actors, and editors and established the longer feature-film model with a running time of approximately 100 minutes. The movies also found more sophisticated subject matter and more elegant theaters for distribution, reflecting their rising cultural status and their ability to attract audiences from all corners of society. Internationally, Hollywood continued to extend its reach. While World War I wreaked havoc on European economies, Hollywood increased its exports fivefold and its overseas income by 35 percent. The most pronounced and important aesthetic changes during this period included the development of narrative realism and the integration of the viewer's perspective into the editing and narrative action.

Narrative realism came to the forefront of movie culture as the movies sought legitimization. From D. W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) and *Intolerance* (1916) **[Figure 2.5]** through King Vidor's *The Big Parade* (1925), films learned to explore simultaneous actions, complex spatial geographies, and the psychological interaction of characters through narrative — with camera movements, framing, and editing that situated viewers *within* the narrative action rather than at a theatrical distance.

2.5 ***Intolerance*** (1916). D. W. Griffith intertwines stories set in four different historical periods in this landmark in the evolution of narrative film form.

With these aesthetic developments came the refinement of genres. During this time, comedians and prominent silent film directors Charlie Chaplin and Buster Keaton drew audiences in with their slapstick vignettes and early narratives, defining the art of the comedy in 1920s Hollywood. Although Chaplin and Keaton each created distinct styles and stories, both replaced the clownish and chaotic gymnastics of early film comedies (such as Mack Sennett's Keystone comedies) with nuanced and acrobatic gestures that dramatized serious human and social themes. Providing a bombastic counterpoint to silent comedies and dramas, Cecil B. DeMille's *The Ten Commandments* (1923) was an expensive and technically advanced spectacle that marked another direction in silent film history **[Figure 2.6]**. Perhaps the most interesting balancing act in *The Ten Commandments* is its portrayal of lurid sex and violence in scenes that are continually reframed by a strong moral perspective. A similar contradiction characterized American attitudes toward the movies more generally. The early 1920s saw a series of sex and drug scandals involving Hollywood stars, and calls for censorship became widespread.

2.6 ***The Ten Commandments*** (1923). Cecil B. DeMille's first version of the biblical story was a silent movie spectacular.

By 1920, comedies, lavish spectacles, and thrilling melodramas attracted fifty million weekly moviegoers, and attendance continued to soar during that decade as audiences followed the offscreen lives of their favorite stars in fan magazines. Technological experiments with sound fostered competition among the studios, culminating in Warner Bros.' successful exhibition of *The Jazz Singer* (1927), the first feature-length film with synchronized speech.

German Expressionist Cinema

By the end of the 1930s, the aesthetic movements and national film industries that had developed in Europe during the silent and early sound eras were shaken by the threat of military conflict. But the internationalism of the first decades of cinema meant that the aesthetic influences of these movements were still considerable and lasting. Expressionism (in film, theater, painting, and other arts) turned away from realist representation and toward the unconscious and irrational sides of human experience. **German expressionist cinema** (1918–1929) represented such dark forces through lighting, sets, and costume design.

After a national film industry was centralized toward the end of World War I, German films began to compete successfully with Hollywood cinema. The postwar Weimar Republic was a period in which culture, science, and the arts flourished, and social norms were relaxed and modernized. The first LGBT activist movie, *Anders als die Andern* (*Different from the Others*), was produced in Germany in 1919 in the socially tolerant Weimar era. Dramatizing the risk of blackmail to a prominent citizen because of his sexual preference, the film advocates the decriminalization of male homosexuality (no statute specifically prohibited lesbianism) and features a lecture by German sexologist Magnus Hirschfeld.

As part of the larger artistic and cultural avant-garde movements of the late 1910s and early 1920s, Weimar-era cinema differed from Hollywood models in that it successfully integrated an explicit commitment to artistic expression into studio production primarily through the giant national Universum Film AG (UFA). The most famous achievement of the expressionist trend in film history is Robert Wiene's *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1920), a dreamlike story of a somnambulist who, in the service of a mad tyrant, stalks innocent victims **[Figure 2.7]**. Along with its story of obsessed and troubled individuals, the film's shadowy atmosphere and strangely distorted artificial sets became trademarks of German expressionist cinema. Meanwhile, G. W. Pabst was a master of the more realistic "street film" genre of the Weimar period. In his film *The Joyless Street* (1925), the realities of city streets become excessive, morbid, and emotionally twisted.

2.7 *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1920). Expressionist sets make this one of the most visually striking films in history.

Two of the most important filmmakers at UFA were Fritz Lang, director of *Dr. Mabuse: The Gambler* (1922), *Metropolis* (1927), and *M* (1931), and F. W. Murnau, director of *Nosferatu* (1922) and *The Last Laugh* (1924). Lang, the most prominent director in pre-Nazi Germany, created the first science fiction blockbuster with *Metropolis* and later had a successful Hollywood career where he enriched film noir pictures like *The Woman in the Window* (1944) with expressionist style and themes. In *Nosferatu*, Murnau re-creates

the vampire legend within a naturalistic setting, one that lighting, camera angles, and other expressive techniques infuse with a supernatural anxiety. Murnau, too, emigrated to Hollywood, where he made one of the masterpieces of silent cinema, *Sunrise* (1929).

Soviet Silent Films

Soviet silent films from 1917 to 1931 represent a break from the entertainment history of the movies. The Soviet cinema of this period developed out of the Russian Revolution of 1917, suggesting its distance from the assumptions and aims of the capitalist economics of Hollywood. These conditions resulted in an emphasis on documentary and historical subjects and a political concept of cinema that was centered on audience response.

Dziga Vertov, a seminal theoretician and practitioner in this movement, established a collective workshop — the Kinoki or "cinema-eyes" — to investigate how cinema communicates both directly and subliminally. He and his colleagues were deeply committed to presenting everyday truths rather than distracting fictions, yet they also recognized that cinema elicits different ideas and responses according to how images are structured and edited. They developed a montage aesthetic suited to the modern world into which the people of the Soviet Union were being catapulted. In the spirit of these theories, Vertov's creative nonfiction film *Man with a Movie Camera* (1929) records not only the activity of the modern city

but also how its energy is transformed by the camera recording it. By moving rapidly from one subject to another; using split screens, superimpositions, and variable film speeds; and continually placing the camera within the action, this movie does more than describe or narrate the city [Figure 2.8].

2.8 ***Man with a Movie Camera*** (1929). The image of the cameraman looms over the city, implying the central role that cinema plays in modern life.

Although Soviet cinema at this time produced many exceptional films, Sergei Eisenstein's *Battleship Potemkin* (1925) quickly became the most renowned outside the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics

(USSR). This film about an uprising of oppressed sailors that heralded the coming revolution retains its place in film history because it brilliantly demonstrates Eisenstein's theories of montage. The film's extraordinary international and critical success enabled Eisenstein to travel throughout Europe, Hollywood, and Mexico. Eventually, he returned to the Soviet Union, where, under Joseph Stalin, socialist realism became the official program in filmmaking. Consequently, the careers of Eisenstein, Vertov, and the other major experimental filmmakers of the revolutionary period declined, with Eisenstein developing an influential body of writing on film.

French Cinema

Alongside the Lumière brothers at the very origin of cinema, magician George Méliès took film art in the direction of the fantastical, producing hundreds of trick films like *The Vanishing Lady* (1896) for export all over the world. The French film industry was the world's most successful before World War I, fueled by successful genre films and thrilling serials like *Les Vampires* (1915), produced by Louis Feuillade for the powerful Gaumont studio.

HISTORY CLOSE UP

Oscar Micheaux

One of the most important rediscovered figures in film history is the African American novelist, writer, producer-director, and impresario Oscar Micheaux (right), who in 1918 directed his first feature film, *The Homesteader*, an adaptation

from his own novel. Micheaux owned and operated an independent production company from 1918 to 1948, producing more than forty feature films on extremely limited budgets, most of which have been lost. Reusing footage and working with untrained actors, he fashioned a distinctly non-Hollywood style whose “errors” can be interpreted as an alternative aesthetic tradition. His most controversial film, *Within Our Gates* (1920) (discussed later in this chapter), realistically portrays the spread of lynching and was threatened with censorship in a period of race riots. Later, in *Body and Soul* (1925), Micheaux teamed up with actor, singer, and activist Paul Robeson in a powerful portrait of a corrupt preacher. Paradoxically, efforts made in the 1940s to persuade Hollywood to produce more progressive representations of African Americans helped put an end to the independent tradition of “race movies,” and Micheaux released his last film, *The Betrayal*, in 1948.

Photofest, Inc.

In the 1920s, cinema as an art form was championed by avant-garde artists and intellectuals in new journals and ciné clubs, and artists and filmmakers conducted radical experiments with film form. Paralleling contemporaneous visual arts like impressionist painting, **French impressionist cinema** was a 1920s avant-garde film movement that aimed to destabilize familiar or objective ways of seeing and to revitalize the dynamics of human perception. Representative of the early impressionist films are Germaine Dulac's

The Seashell and the Clergyman (1928), Jean Epstein's *The Fall of the House of Usher* (1928), Marcel L'Herbier's *L'Argent* (1928), and Abel Gance's three daring narrative films — *I Accuse* (1919), *The Wheel* (1923), and *Napoléon* (1927). Dulac's surrealist film illustrates the daring play between subject matter and form that was typical of these films. *The Seashell and the Clergyman* barely concentrates on its story (a priest pursues a beautiful woman), focusing instead on the memories, hallucinations, and fantasies of the central character, depicted with split screens and other strange imagistic effects. Equally lyrical but very different in form, Danish director Carl Theodor Dreyer's *The Passion of Joan of Arc* (1928) focuses on the expressivity of the human face in close-up in what many consider the pinnacle of silent film as an art form **[Figure 2.9]**.

2.9 ***The Passion of Joan of Arc*** (1928). This searing portrait explores spiritual and cinematic expressivity through a series of powerful close-ups.

Classical Cinema (1929–1945)

The introduction of synchronized sound in 1927 inaugurated a period of Hollywood consolidation that lasted until the end of World War II in 1945. The Great Depression, triggered in part by the stock market collapse of 1929, defined the American cultural experience at the beginning of the 1930s. Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal became the political antidote for much of the 1930s, pumping a determined spirit of optimism into society. The catastrophic conflict of World War II then defined the last four years of the classical period, in which the United States fully asserted its global leadership and control.

The film industry followed the turbulent events with dramatic changes of its own. The "Big Five" studios (20th Century Fox, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, Paramount, Warner Bros., and RKO) along with the "Little Three" (Columbia, Universal, and United Artists) dominated the industry by controlling distributors and theater chains and exerting great industrial and cultural power. With social issues more hotly debated and the movies gaining more influence than ever, the messages of films came increasingly under scrutiny.

Formed in 1922, the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors Association of America (MPDAA, now the MPAA) enlisted former postmaster general William H. Hays to regulate movies' moral

content through what became known as the "Hays Office." The Motion Picture Production Code, adopted in 1930, was at first widely ignored, but in 1934 the MPDAA set up the Production Code Administration, headed by Joseph I. Breen, to enforce it strictly. The code's conservative list of principles governed primarily the depiction of crime and sex and kept censorship efforts within the industry rather than under government regulation.

Sometimes the Code's provisions led to distortions of original source material. Lillian Hellman's hit Broadway play *The Children's Hour* **[Figure 2.10]** dealt with the consequences of a malicious child's lies about the lesbian relationship between the headmistresses of her school. But because under the Code, "homosexuality and any inference to it are prohibited," the 1936 movie version, *These Three*, implied that the child's gossip was about one teacher's affair with the other's fiancé, a change that puzzled audiences familiar with the play.

2.10 ***The Children's Hour*** (1961). Lillian Hellman's 1936 play was eventually faithfully adapted to the screen after the Production Code was relaxed in the 1960s, but by then its depiction of the main character's suicide was dated and damaging.

At this time, Hollywood films followed these industry shifts with two important stylistic features: the elaboration of movie dialogue and the growth of characterization in films, and the prominence of generic formulas in constructing film narratives. Sound technology opened a whole new dimension to film form that allowed movies to expand their dramatic capacity. Accomplished writers flocked to Hollywood, literary adaptations flourished, and characters became more psychologically complex through the use of dialogue. Popular music often was featured, and African American performers were included even as they remained barred from central dramatic roles. Meanwhile, generic formulas, like musicals and westerns, became

the primary production and distribution standard. In fact, genres sometimes superseded the subject matter and actors in defining a film and expectations about it.

During Hollywood's golden age in the 1930s and 1940s, an exceptional number and variety of studio classics emerged. Frank Capra's *It Happened One Night* (1934) is perhaps one of the best representations of the energy that was making its way from the New York theatrical stage to the Hollywood screen after the arrival of synchronized dialogue. The film's social allegory about common people correcting the greed and egotism of the rich defined Capra's vision throughout this decade and into the 1940s **[Figure 2.11]**. Similarly, veteran director John Ford elevated the western with *Stagecoach* (1939). In 1939, *Stagecoach* joined *Gone with the Wind, The Wizard of Oz, Wuthering Heights*, and *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* as a contender for the year's best picture Oscar (Capra's *You Can't Take It with You* won the honor), making it a banner year for classical Hollywood.

2.11 ***It Happened One Night*** (1934). Frank Capra's screwball comedy — about a rebellious socialite (Claudette Colbert) who flees her wealthy father and takes up, reluctantly, with a reporter (Clark Gable) who hopes to use her scandalous behavior as a news scoop — is a quintessential 1930s Hollywood film.

Although 65 percent of Americans attended the movies weekly in 1930, many kinds of Americans were not represented in them. Stereotypes of racial and ethnic minorities and the casting of white actors to portray people of color were endemic to this period. Hattie McDaniel won the first Oscar awarded to an African American performer for her portrayal of Mammy in *Gone with the Wind* even as the film met with criticism in the black press for glorifying the

slaveholding South. By 1942, many African American men were serving in the U.S. military, and the studios reached an agreement with National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) leader Walter White to monitor the representation of African Americans in films. Also during the war, representations of Latin Americans were encouraged, and monitored, under the Roosevelt administration's official Good Neighbor policy.

Employment behind the scenes in Hollywood was also limited, with few people of color working in key creative positions. One of these, Chinese American cinematographer James Wong Howe, was nominated for ten Academy Awards and won two. Women were restricted by the studios to specific production roles, such as script supervisor or editor. The most prominent and, for a considerable period, the only active female director in sound-era Hollywood was Dorothy Arzner **[Figure 2.12]**. Her films *Christopher Strong* (1933) and *Dance, Girl, Dance* (1940) feature strong heroines played by top stars Katharine Hepburn and Lucille Ball, and they portray significant bonds between women within their more traditional storylines of heterosexual romance.

2.12 *Dorothy Arzner*. Arzner was the only woman to direct Hollywood films in the 1930s, the heyday of the studio system.

European Cinema in the 1930s and 1940s

The introduction of synchronized sound presented a challenge to cinema's internationalism even as rising nationalism in Europe used cinema to define linguistic and cultural heritage. Weimar cinema shows these tensions in the early sound film *The Blue Angel* (1930), which was filmed simultaneously in German, French, and English. Marlene Dietrich plays her breakthrough role as a cabaret singer

who seduces an aging professor. Another Weimar film, *Mädchen in Uniform* (1931), written by lesbian author Christa Winsloe and based on her own play **[Figure 2.13]**, depicts a young woman's boarding-school crush on a sympathetic teacher. Featuring an all-female cast and directed by a woman, Leontine Sagan, the film cautions against repressive hierarchies that would soon become omnipresent in Nazi Germany and itself was subject to censorship.

Photofest, Inc.

2.13 ***Mädchen in Uniform*** (1931). This Weimar-era film about a student's crush on her teacher features an all-female cast and was written and directed by women.

Socially conscious directors René Clair, Jean Vigo, Marcel Carné, and Jean Renoir integrated artistic innovations into traditional narrative in **poetic realism** — a film movement in 1930s France that incorporated a lyrical style and a fatalistic view of life. Renoir's *The Rules of the Game* (1939) **[Figure 2.14]** is on one level a realistic account of social conflict and disintegration. A tale of aristocrats and their servants gathered for a holiday in the country, the film is a satirical and often biting critique of the hypocrisy and brutality of this microcosm of decadent society. The film's insight and wit come from lighting, long takes, and framing that draw out dark ironies not visible on the surface of the relationships. One of the film's most noted sequences features a hunting expedition in which the editing searingly equates the slaughter of birds and rabbits with the social behavior of the hunters toward each other.

2.14 ***The Rules of the Game*** (1939). Jean Renoir's masterwork of poetic realism is known for its fluid style and critique of bourgeois society.

Meanwhile, Jean Vigo's *Zero for Conduct* (1933) takes up the themes of rebellion and social critique by depicting tyranny at a boys' boarding school. The boys' spirit of rebellion is conveyed in a combination of realistic narrative and lyrical, sometimes fantastical, images. These images dramatize the wild and anarchic vision of the young boys: at one point a pillow fight erupts in the dormitory, and the whirlwind of pillow feathers transforms the room into a paradise of disorder. The spirit of poeticism and critique that informed these directors' visions, although not impossible to convey in Hollywood films of the

period, was discouraged by the industrial and commercial orientation of filmmaking in Hollywood.

Golden Age Mexican Cinema

In the mid-1930s, the Mexican film industry entered its own golden age with films like Fernando de Fuentes's drama *Vamonos con Pancho Villa!* (*Let's Go with Pancho Villa*) (1936), celebrating the revolutionary leader. With European production directly affected by war and Hollywood focusing on wartime genres, Mexican studios became a center of film production for national and international markets.

Successful melodramas, comedies, and musicals featured beloved stars such as Pedro Infante. Dolores del Rio returned from a successful career in Hollywood to her native Mexico to star in prolific director Emilio "El Indo" Fernandez's *Maria Candelaria* (1944). Fernandez also guided Maria Félix in *Enamorada* (1946). Perhaps most iconic of all was the comic actor Cantinflas, the persona of actor Mario Moreno, who became a symbol of the Mexican people. Although the Mexican film industry was eclipsed in the postwar period, a resurgence of auteurism in an industrial context took place much later, at the end of the century.

Postwar Cinemas (1945–1975)

World War II indelibly altered the map of world politics and culture. Cinema, already a mature art form and social force, became an important barometer of these changes. The Hollywood studio system faced legal, economic, and cultural challenges at home and artistic and political challenges from the many new wave cinemas emerging around the world, which were catalyzed by new ideas and alliances in the postwar period. As new media technologies and leisure options began to vie with cinema, the movies attempted to consolidate their hold on the public.

Postwar Hollywood

Unrest characterized postwar America. The start of the Cold War began an extended period of tension and anxiety about national identity and security. Traditional institutions — such as the family unit, sexual relationships, and established social relations — stood on the brink of tremendous change. In the 1950s and 1960s, the civil rights movement and women's liberation began to mobilize to challenge social injustice. Changes within the film industry dismantled some of the power of the studios, opening American cinema to many of these social and political changes. The end of the studio era led to two important shifts: the recognition and eventual

dominance of youth audiences and the increasing influence of European art films.

The most notorious ideological conflict in Hollywood history occurred immediately after World War II, when the film industry came under congressional investigation for alleged Communist infiltration. The movie colony was a sensational target for the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) hearings, held as part of the Red Scare instigated by Senator Joseph McCarthy. Ten directors, screenwriters, and producers — who became known as the "Hollywood Ten" — refused to answer HUAC's questions and were jailed for contempt of Congress.

A number of other events greatly affected Hollywood during the postwar period. After the U.S. Supreme Court's 1948 decision in *United States v. Paramount Pictures, Inc.*, the studios were ordered to divest their theater chains, effectively ending their control of the industry. This decline in studio power was accompanied by the arrival of television and its rapid spread in the 1950s. Finally, in 1968, the Production Code era officially ended, and the MPAA ratings system was introduced. Movies grew more daring and darker as they loosened or challenged the formulas of classical Hollywood and explored controversial themes and issues. Competing with television, they also developed a more self-conscious and exaggerated sense of image composition and narrative structure.

Beginning with *The Best Years of Our Lives* (1946) and its layered tale of postwar trauma in small-town America, films delved into such subjects as family betrayal, alcoholism and drug abuse, sexuality, racial injustice, and psychological breakdowns. African American actor Sidney Poitier took on a symbolic role for a nation coming to terms with racial division in films like *The Defiant Ones* (1958) and *In the Heat of the Night* (1967). These new topics introduced more unpredictable characters and narratives as well as sometimes subversive and violent visual styles, exemplified in Orson Welles's *Touch of Evil* (1958) and Alfred Hitchcock's shocking *Psycho* (1960). John Ford's westerns can be seen as historical barometers of this transitional and turbulent period in Hollywood. *My Darling Clementine* (1946), the prototypical western, is a meditation on the power of nature and communal individualism to overcome evil, while *The Searchers* (1956) is a morally ambivalent tale about where violence and racism reside, featuring an older John Wayne as a racist cowboy **[Figure 2.15]**.

2.15 ***The Searchers*** (1956). John Ford's late western uses lead actor John Wayne and the Monument Valley settings familiar from their long collaboration to bring out dark themes of racist violence in the settling of the West.

As examples of the film noir cycle, Charles Vidor's *Gilda* (1946) and Howard Hawks's *The Big Sleep* (1946) both reflect the postwar period's social and personal instability and explore the perceived threat of female sexuality and autonomy. As if reflecting their troubled characters and actions in their form, film noir narratives seem to lose their direction, and their visual styles are overwhelmed with gloom. Rita Hayworth's performance in *Gilda* transforms the femme fatale into a sympathetic character, however, appealing to female audiences who were confronting the conflicted roles of women in the 1940s, when their new freedoms in the workforce were perceived as a threat to job-seeking veterans **[Figure 2.16]**.

2.16 ***Gilda*** (1946). Set in a casino in Argentina at the end of World War II, this film indirectly represents fears about shifting gender roles on the home front.

As the studio mode of production loosened its hold, more independent producers came forward. Ida Lupino, a well-known actress, began directing hard-hitting, low-budget independent films such as *Hard, Fast and Beautiful* (1951), about a mother who pushes her daughter to succeed in a tennis career. Lupino later had a successful directing career in television, an arena that offered more opportunities for women to create in the postwar period.

By the late 1950s and 1960s, younger audiences came to the forefront of movie culture. Drive-in movie theaters, which catered to teenage audiences, were one manifestation of this trend. Another was the college and urban audiences for art films and other alternative cinemas that proliferated after 1960. Nicholas Ray's *Rebel Without a Cause* (1955) gives what was a shocking depiction of a generational crisis in America in which teenagers drift aimlessly beyond parental guidance **[Figure 2.17]**. Roger Corman's American International Pictures made even more blatant attempts to exploit young audiences with work like *Attack of the Crab Monsters* (1957) and a series of 1960s films based on the stories of Edgar Allan Poe. At the same time, with films like Ingmar Bergman's *The Seventh Seal* (1957) and Federico Fellini's 8½ (1963) — two very different meditations on existential questions — movies shown in new art-house theaters came to be considered complex artistic objects that justified aesthetic appreciation and academic study.

2.17 ***Rebel Without a Cause*** (1955). Teenage angst and juvenile delinquency are on display in Nicholas Ray's CinemaScope classic.

Postwar prosperity and the growth of the suburbs led audiences to new consumption patterns, especially the rapid adoption of the television. Hollywood answered with spectacular color and widescreen technologies that could not be duplicated at home. When the studios were ordered to divest their theater holdings, independent cinema owners were able to court new urban demographics. Both foreign art cinema and exploitation cinema found audiences among nonconforming youth, with depictions of sexuality and violence prohibited in mainstream filmmaking. Although the studio system produced one of its last and highest-budgeted family films in 1965, *The Sound of Music*, classical Hollywood's reign was waning as the civil rights movement, political violence, and the war in Vietnam heated up.

Younger filmmakers influenced by the rebellious energy of new European films ironically showed Hollywood its survival path. The unprecedented violence and irreverent tone of Arthur Penn's *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967), made at Warner Bros. with the support of star Warren Beatty, challenged mainstream sensibilities. But it was a box-office hit, turning Hollywood's attention to youth audiences for decades to come.

In the early 1970s, Hollywood also targeted an urban market with a genre of low-budget films about streetwise African American protagonists known as **blaxploitation**. Although the term cynically

suggests the economic exploitation of black film audiences, the genre was made possible in part by the black power movement, and some African American filmmakers turned the genre to their own purposes. The studio-produced and immensely successful *Shaft* (1971) was directed by noted photographer Gordon Parks. And Melvin Van Peebles wrote, directed, scored, and starred in *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* (1971), which incorporates revolutionary rhetoric in a kinetic tale of a black man pursued by racist cops **[Figure 2.18]**.

2.18 ***Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song*** (1971). Melvin Van Peebles's militant blaxploitation film became a hit.

An independent New American Cinema was emerging in New York, exemplified by John Cassavetes's *Faces* (1959), made on low-budget, 16mm film. At the same time, Hollywood was doing its best to incorporate new voices into the system, hiring younger, often film-school-trained directors. Francis Ford Coppola's Oscar-winning *The Godfather* (1972) **[Figure 2.19]** defined the convergence of directorial and marketing talent characteristic of the era of the New Hollywood.

2.19 ***The Godfather*** (1972). Perhaps the key example of the New Hollywood, Francis Ford Coppola's film was an economic and artistic success.

International Art Cinema

In the aftermath of World War II, new filmmaking styles and fresh voices emerged in Europe and quickly spread around the world.

Studio filmmaking was either compromised by its alliance with defeated government powers or seemed old-fashioned in the face of emerging youth culture and prosperity. These new currents in cinema served an important political role in the immediate postwar period, with major European film festivals in Cannes, Venice, and Berlin establishing their prominence in defining cultural worth. Highlighting the work of particular directors, they cultivated an auteurist approach to film art and, by including directors from outside of Europe, emphasized the internationalism of the medium as part of a hoped-for new order of peace and prosperity.

Italian Neorealism

One of the most profound influences in international postwar art cinema was **Italian neorealism**, a film movement that began in Italy during World War II and lasted until approximately 1952. Neorealism shed light on everyday social realities, often using location shooting and nonprofessional actors. Its relatively short history belies its far-reaching effects. At a critical juncture of world history, Italian cinema revitalized film culture by depicting postwar social crises and using a stark, realistic style clearly different from the glossy entertainment formulas of Hollywood and other studio systems.

Earlier in the century, Italian film spectacles such as *Quo Vadis?* (1913) and *Cabiria* (1914) had created a taste for lavish epics. The

films produced at the Cinecittà ("cinema city") studios under Benito Mussolini's fascist regime (1922–1943) were similarly glossy, decorative entertainments. During wartime in 1942, screenwriter Cesare Zavattini set the stage for neorealism, calling for a new cinema that would forsake entertainment formulas and promote social realism instead. Luchino Visconti responded with *Ossessione* (1943), and Vittorio De Sica directed Zavattini's screenplays to produce such classics as *Bicycle Thieves* (1948). Perhaps the best example of the accomplishments and contradictions of this movement is Roberto Rossellini's *Rome, Open City* (1945), shot under adverse conditions at the end of the war **[Figure 2.20]**. Set during the Nazi occupation of Rome (1943–1944), the film intentionally approximates newsreel images to depict the strained and desperate street life of the war-torn city. (The phrase *open city* refers to a city that has agreed not to defend itself against invaders, who then agree not to bomb or destroy buildings.) The plot tells of a community that protects a resistance fighter who is being hunted by the German Gestapo/SS and that experiences the tragic deaths of people caught in between, sounding a note that reverberated throughout postwar movie cultures. Subsequent Italian cinema — including the work of directors Pier Paolo Pasolini, Michelangelo Antonioni, Vittorio and Paolo Taviani, Marco Bellocchio, Bernardo Bertolucci, and even Federico Fellini — follows from this neorealist history even when it introduces new forms and subjects.

2.20 ***Rome, Open City*** (1945). Roberto Rossellini's film exemplifies Italian neorealism in its use of war-ravaged locations, nonprofessional actors, and contemporary subject matter.

French New Wave and Other New Wave Cinemas

A particularly rich period of cinema history occurred in the wake of Italian neorealism, from the 1950s through the 1970s, when numerous daring film movements, often designated as new waves, appeared in Brazil, Czechoslovakia, France, Germany, Japan, and the United Kingdom. Despite their exceptional variety, these

different new waves share two common postwar interests that counterpoint their often nationalistic flavor — the use of film to express a personal vision and a break with past filmmaking institutions and genres.

Go to **launchpadworks.com** to view the online clips of *Gilda* (1946) and *Rome, Open City* (1945), which were produced at roughly the same time. What makes them identifiable by period? Can you identify contrasts between classical Hollywood and Italian neorealist style?

The first and most influential new wave cinema, the Nouvelle Vague or **French New Wave**, came to prominence in the late 1950s and 1960s in France in opposition to the conventional studio system. These films often were made with low budgets and young actors on location, used unconventional sound and editing patterns, and addressed the struggle for personal expression. These exceptionally rich and varied films were influenced by filmmakers as diverse as the minimalist Robert Bresson and the comedic genius Jacques Tati. Within a little more than a year, three definitive films appeared — François Truffaut's *The 400 Blows* (1959), Alain Resnais's *Hiroshima mon amour* (1959), and Jean-Luc Godard's *Breathless* (1960). Although the style and subject matter of these films are extremely different, they each demonstrate the struggle for personal expression and the formal investigation of film as a communication system.

The vitality of these films broke with the past and immediately affected international audiences. Indeed, this vitality often was expressed in memorable stylistic innovations, such as the freeze-frame on the boy protagonist's face that ends *The 400 Blows*, the jump cuts that register the restlessness of the antihero of *Breathless*, and the time-traveling editing of *Hiroshima mon amour*.

Much of the inspiration for the French New Wave filmmakers sprang from the work of film critic and theoretician André Bazin. In 1951, Bazin helped establish the journal *Cahiers du cinéma*, many of whose contributors would become some of the most renowned

directors of the movement, including Eric Rohmer, Claude Chabrol, Truffaut, and Godard. The revitalization of film language occurred in conjunction with the journal's policy of auteurism (*la politique des auteurs*) or **auteur theory**, which emphasized the role of the director as an expressive author. Writing and directing their own films, paying tribute to the important figures emerging around the world (like Michelangelo Antonioni, Ingmar Bergman, and Akira Kurosawa), and reevaluating the work of Hollywood directors, the young French filmmaker-critics helped shape the perspective and culture that elevated film to the art form it is considered to be today. Figures less directly associated with *Cahiers du cinéma,* such as Chris Marker and Agnès Varda **[Figure 2.21]**, brought a similar spirit and a more political focus to documentaries and other personal films.

2.21 Agnès Varda in *The Gleaners and I* (2000). With the feature film *Cléo from 5 to 7* (1962), Varda became the only woman director celebrated in the French New Wave. She also made documentaries like *Salut les Cubains (Hello to the Cubans)* (1963), a practice to which she later returned.

Many French filmmakers took up political positions as the war for Algeria's independence from France unfolded (1954–1962) and as student and worker strikes swept the nation in May 1968. Among them, Godard was the most formally experimental, collaborating under the name Dziga Vertov Group on films like *Vent d'est* (*Wind from the East*) (1969). Other new waves in the 1960s and 1970s were influenced by the Nouvelle Vague's use of amateur actors,

improvised dialogue, street locations, and increasing politicization. Although the spirit of these movements and the formal innovations of the films challenged entrenched state-and commercially dominated national film industries, they were still largely identified with the concept of the nation. Since the 1980s and 1990s, French cinema has moved in new directions, producing numerous commercial and artistic successes, such as *Amélie* (2001), *The Artist* (2011), and *Les Misérables* (2019).

Catalyzed by the neorealism of the Nouvelle Vague, new wave cinemas burst out across the globe. The **British New Wave** — sometimes referred to as "kitchen sink" cinema and related to the "angry young men" of John Osborne's play and the UK theater scene in 1950s — typically focused on working-class realism and discontent. Rebellious youth took center stage in films like *The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner* (1962) and *A Taste of Honey* (1961). British cinema has often thrived on inventive literary adaptations like *Tom Jones* (1963) and *Mrs. Dalloway* (1997) and has featured major international directors like Stephen Frears, Derek Jarman, Sally Potter, and Ken Loach, who has remained true to the social realism of the fifties and sixties with films like *I, Daniel Blake* (2016) and *Sorry We Missed You* (2019).

Other new wave cinemas proliferated across the globe in the decades after World War II. A brief efflorescence of often absurdist films like Věra Chytilová's *Daisies* (1966) constituted the politically

subversive **Czech New Wave**. This movement came to prominence in 1960s Czechoslovakia and used absurdist humor, nonprofessional actors, and improvised dialogue to express political dissent. It ended with the Soviet invasion in 1969. Meanwhile, the **Cinema Novo** movement (1960s–1970s) in Brazil emphasized social equality and intellectualism and broke with studio gloss. Brazilian director Glauber Rocha embraced an "aesthetics of hunger" in the violent and mystical *Black God, White Devil* (1964).

Japanese Cinema

The Golden Lion awarded at the 1951 Venice International Film Festival to Akira Kurosawa's *Rashomon* (1950) marked a new era of visibility for Japanese cinema in the West. Japan is one of the world's largest film-producing nations and has a long and varied tradition of using distinct perceptual and generic forms and drawing on a range of cultural and artistic traditions. After World War II and the subsequent Allied occupation, Japanese films increasingly incorporated Hollywood forms and styles, yet still emphasized the contemplative aspect of images and placed character rather than action at the center of the narrative.

Kenji Mizoguchi, Yasujiro Ozu, Akira Kurosawa, and Nagisa Oshima are among the most celebrated names in Japanese cinema, with the long careers of the first two beginning in the silent period (which lasted into the 1930s in Japan). Ozu's midcareer masterpiece, *Tokyo*

Story (1953), highlights his exquisite sense of the rhythms of everyday life, conveyed through carefully composed frames, long takes, and a low camera height.

Japanese cinema has been particularly dynamic in recent years, with the Cannes Film Festival becoming a barometer of this resurgence. In 2010, Takeshi Kitano's *Outrage* competed for Palme d'Or, and Takashi Miike's *Hara-Kiri: Death of a Samurai* in 2012 became the first 3-D film to be part of that competition. In 2018, Hirokazu Kore-Eda's *Shoplifters* won that prize **[Figure 2.22]**.

2.22 *Shoplifters* (2018). A tale of a family of lost children and mismatched parents who survive by shoplifting, this film is one of the latest achievements in the rich history of Japanese cinema.

The energies of postwar cinema are especially evident in *Rashomon*, which uses multiple, contradictory narrations of the same crime from characters' differing points of view. Recognition at European film festivals — such as the Silver Lion won by Mizoguchi's ghost story *Ugetsu* (1950) at Venice — established Japanese cinema's centrality to postwar art cinema and helped Japanese auteurs achieve international notoriety. Later, Oshima helped define Japan's new wave with the violent erotic masterpiece *In the Realm of the Senses* (1976).

Going beyond art cinema, many distinctly Japanese genres produced for national audiences eventually earned international followings. The first of dozens of films featuring the monster Godzilla was produced in 1954 **[Figure 2.23]**. Meanwhile, Japanese animation, or **anime**, which was first launched following World War II, received international attention through 1960s television exports and eventually became a subculture among fans in the United States.

2.23 *Godzilla* (1954). The seminal Japanese monster movie spawned a series that continues to this day. *Shin Godzilla* was released in 2016.

Indian Cinema

The first Indian movie premiered in 1913, but the golden age of Indian cinema came after independence in 1948 with the ascendance of the Bombay-based industry with its stars, songs, and spectacular successes. During the same period, Parallel Cinema, centered mainly in Calcutta and exemplified by the films of renowned director Satyajit Ray, arose as an alternative to India's commercial cinema. Ray's modest black-and-white film *Pather Panchali* (1955) has been heralded internationally as a masterpiece

of realist style. This film, together with the two subsequent features in the "Apu trilogy" (named after their main character), is rooted in Bengali literature, landscape, and culture. Both traditions — popular blockbusters and realist, regional dramas — continue to thrive in contemporary Indian cinema.

In the 1970s, India overtook Hollywood as the world's largest film producer, driven largely by the hundreds of Hindi-language films produced annually in Mumbai. Often referred to as **Bollywood** films, they are a dominant cultural form notable for rootedness in Hindu culture and mythology and for elaborate song-and-dance numbers.

With an episodic narrative form based in theatrical traditions that accommodate musical numbers, many Hindi films highlight star performances. Nargis plays the title role of Mehboob Khan's *Mother India* (1957; see also the Film in Focus feature later in this chapter), and the phenomenally successful action star Amitabh Bachchan was featured in one of the most popular Bollywood films of all time, *Sholay* (1975).

Indian cinema remains the world's most prolific film industry, with the subcontinent's large population served by films produced in a number of languages besides Hindi, including Bengali, Marathi, and Tamil. Indian diasporan audiences in South and Southeast Asia, the

Middle East, and the West contribute to the industry's increasingly global success and influence.

FILM IN FOCUS *Mother India* and Postwar History (1957)

See also: *Pyassa* (1957); *The Apu Trilogy* (1955–1959)

To watch a clip from *Mother India* (1957), go to LaunchPad for *The Film Experience* at **launchpadworks.com**

India's drive for self-rule and freedom from British colonization, spanning ninety years of regular rebellions, culminated in the Indian Independence Act of 1947. It was one of many countries that achieved independence in the wake of World War II as the world map shifted away from the colonial empires of Britain and France to reflect the anticolonial positions of the postwar powers, the United States and the Soviet Union. In India and in other newly independent nations across the world, new national identities began to form — and, with them, new national film cultures that aimed to represent those identities. One of the defining films of postwar Indian cinema was Mehboob Khan's *Mother India* (1957), a nearly three-hour epic that immediately established box-office records in India and won numerous global awards and critical accolades. Since then, the film has become a definitive Indian classic that, even at the time of its release, announced India's growing importance and prominence on the changing stage of world cinema.

An intensely patriotic film, *Mother India* was released in 1957 to commemorate the ten-year anniversary of Indian independence. The film tells the story of Radha, an

elderly matriarch who at the beginning of the film is asked to inaugurate the opening of her village's new irrigation canal. The film then transitions to the beginning of her story as an extended historical flashback: her marriage to Shamu, their crushing debt because of the extravagance of their wedding, a farming accident that leaves her husband crippled, his subsequent inability to support his family, his self-exile in disgrace, and, finally, the death of Radha's mother-in-law and two of her four sons. When a violent storm later destroys the village and its fields, Radha refuses to let the villagers abandon their homes and instead inspires them to rebuild their fields and their lives. Later, one of her two remaining sons becomes an embittered and vindictive outlaw, whom Radha must tragically shoot in order to preserve her honor and the greater good of the village.

Throughout the catastrophic events of her life, Radha stands as a pillar of virtue, defying her misfortunes and resisting a tyrannical moneylender's demands. "Radha is not for sale," she tells the corrupt moneylender. "She'll die but not sell herself. She can be sold only for her kids." In the end, she leads the village and its people into a brighter future as the film comes full circle and returns to the celebration of the new canal, which irrigates the village fields, now flourishing under her maternal gaze.

Radha becomes an unmistakable image of and metaphor for modern, postwar India, personified as a woman who looks both backward and forward in its history **[Figure 2.24]**. On the one hand, she is the emblem of a historical past, an embodiment of the ancient Hindu female archetype of the mother who nurtures society through self-sacrifice and virtue. In close-up shots of her determined face and body, she works side by side with her new husband in the dry, rocky fields, and, when faced with starvation, she sells her wedding jewelry to feed her children. On the other hand, Radha represents a new, independent India that overcomes its many hardships and challenges to thrive as a new nation in which women are active and independent leaders. Abandoned by her proud but humiliated husband, she steps forward as a vocal leader of her family and eventually becomes the matriarch of her village.

Linking India's rich precolonial history and its boundless energy and potential after independence, *Mother India* — much like *Gone with the Wind* (1939) in the United States — is the epitome of a midcentury national epic heralding a nation's advancement out of its past and into a dynamic future. Most national epics — from Virgil's *Aeneid* about Italy to Walt Whitman's "Song of Myself" about the United States — narrate the intersection of a heroic individual with the discovery of a singular national identity. In *Mother India*, it is a female heroine who maps that path to future liberation through her struggles to overcome the past.

2.24 ***Mother India*** (1957). Legendary Indian actress Nargis (born Fatime Rashid) takes on the iconic role of a mother who withstands hardship and becomes an allegorical figure of an independent India.

A subtle but important sign of the film's historical significance is its music. Bollywood cinema is well known for weaving song and dance into the narrative as a way of articulating characters' desires, questions, and actions. In *Mother India*,

the music not only identifies the characters' needs and hopes but also blends Indian songs, dance, and melodies with classical Western motifs and structure, alongside an orchestral score by celebrated composer Naushad Ali that echoes the music of Hollywood studio films. Thus, the film's music underscores the expansion of India's postwar culture as necessarily in dialogue with other global, and specifically Hollywood, perspectives and formulas.

The visual compositions of the film likewise present a similar awareness of India's changing place in history. Throughout the film, Technicolor long shots draw attention to the connection between the physical land of India and the rejuvenating force of water. This dynamic intersection produces a fecund and flourishing culture where the vast landscape of dry plains and open wilderness is transformed into vibrantly beautiful images. Maintaining and cultivating one's own land is the way to an independent identity for Radha, for the village, and for India as a whole — and as part of that emerging agency, the land itself shimmers with a new radiance. Anticipating the bulldozers, cranes, and industrial trucks that open the film in her future life, throughout the film Radha works the fields with tireless resolve to preserve herself, her village, and — by implication — her new nation. At one dramatic point, after Radha leads the village back from the catastrophic loss of its fields, the villagers' celebration of their new harvest appears in a long crane shot shaped like a multicolored map of India from above [**Figure 2.25**].

Mother India acts out the signs of its historical times and the transformative social and artistic energies that followed World War II and the expansion of global cultures. By linking India's past, present, and future, the film pays tribute to its country's rich history while signaling the rise of an influential Indian cinema which remains a thriving industry to this day.

2.25 ***Mother India*** (1957). The labor to preserve a village becomes the image of a new India.

Third Cinema

VIEWING CUE

Scan local film and television listings, noting how many different countries are represented. If the range is limited, why do you think this is so? If you have located foreign films, what kinds of venues or channels show them?

Inspired by the politicized atmosphere of Third World decolonization in the 1960s, Argentine filmmakers Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino championed revolutionary filmmaking in Latin America in their 1969 manifesto "Towards a Third Cinema." Their populist vision arose in opposition to Hollywood and to commercial film cultures elsewhere (which they dubbed "first cinema") and in response to the elitist aesthetics of auteur films (or "second cinema"). The term **Third Cinema** has been used to unite films from many countries under one political and formal rubric, including some made by Europeans, such as *The Battle of Algiers* (1966), directed by Italian Marxist Gillo Pontecorvo in cooperation with the victorious Algerian revolutionary government. In Latin America, Solanas and Getino's *The Hour of the Furnaces* (1968) incited political opposition and cultural renewal in Argentina.

For advocates of Third Cinema, the creation of the Cuban Institute of Cinematographic Art and Industry in postrevolutionary Cuba provided the ideal testing ground for the role of film within an emerging nation's cultural identity. Tomás Gutiérrez Alea's *Memories of Underdevelopment* (1968), about a middle-class intellectual contemplating the changes in postrevolutionary society, is among the best-known examples of Cuban cinema **[Figure 2.26]**.

2.26 ***Memories of Underdevelopment*** (1968). Tomás Gutiérrez Alea's film paints an ambivalent portrait of a disaffected intellectual who grapples with the survival of traditional culture in postrevolutionary Cuba.

The very term *Third Cinema* evokes its particular era in world politics — one that was dominated by First and Second World superpowers preoccupied with the Cold War and that witnessed sometimes-violent nation-building struggles in the Third World. As the global contours of politics and culture shifted, Third Cinema became an aesthetic catalyst for a transnational filmmaking culture.

Cinematic Globalization (1975–2000)

The last quarter of the twentieth century saw significant economic, political, and technological changes that consolidated U.S. dominance in global film markets and fostered an efflorescence of film art around the world. In the United States, new cultural pressures followed the end of the Vietnam War in 1975. The globalization of financial markets and the dissolution of the Soviet bloc in the 1990s redistributed global power. Postcolonial migrations continued to transform European societies and global cities, and international debt policies affected developing nations. The rise of new nationalisms and fundamentalisms ignited violent conflicts and prolonged wars. Cinema and other kinds of cultural production became crucial to mediating individuals' experiences of these events and transformations.

It is impossible to be fully inclusive of the world's film culture in this period. New cinemas came to prominence on the global scene, and international coproductions increased. In addition to the story of New Hollywood in the era of blockbusters and franchises, we have selected a few examples of national and regional cinemas to illuminate important histories and trends. European, Indian, Chinese, African, and Iranian cinemas illustrate different developments of cinema and globalization, but many other national

and regional cinemas, directors, aesthetic movements, and institutions would be equally deserving of attention.

New Hollywood in the Blockbuster Era

With Steven Spielberg's *Jaws* (1975) **[Figure 2.27]**, the commercial movie industry in the United States introduced economic strategies that guided blockbuster and franchise production and releases through the end of the century, consolidating Hollywood power and media ownership in a small number of companies. As has been seen, at the end of the 1960s, Hollywood turned some of its power over to young filmmakers, who began to address the teenage audiences that made up larger and larger portions of the moviegoing public. The success of *The Godfather* (1972) at the beginning of the decade ushered in a remarkable series of New Hollywood films. Influenced by European art cinemas, films such as *The Godfather Part II* (1974), *Taxi Driver* (1976), and *The Deer Hunter* (1978) took imaginative risks in form and subject matter and pushed the representation of violence well beyond what classical Hollywood had permitted.

2.27 *Jaws* (1975). Widely considered the first summer blockbuster, Steven Spielberg's shark thriller was the highest-grossing movie of all time until it was surpassed by *Star Wars* a few years later.

New Hollywood's strategy for courting youth audiences changed significantly, however, when global conglomerate enterprises began to assimilate and shape the industry. Corporate Hollywood redirected youthful energy toward more commercial blockbusters and global markets. As the first film to be released simultaneously on hundreds of theater screens and promoted though national television advertising, *Jaws* (1975) ushered in the era of aggressively marketed summer blockbusters. *Jaws* was soon topped at the box office by George Lucas's *Star Wars* (1977), which ushered in the now prevalent franchise formula with its sequels, reissues, and tie-ins. Film critic Robin Wood characterizes the films of the Reagan era as a "cinema of reassurance," with films like *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (1981) expressing nostalgia for an era of clearly defined heroes and bad guys. During this same period, technological innovations and

market innovations (including home video and cable television) disseminated movies in new ways, offering viewers more variety and control while increasing media companies' profits from ancillary markets.

Amid so many sweeping changes in film culture, two trends characterize the last quarter of the twentieth century in film: the elevation of spectacles featuring special effects and the fragmentation and reflexivity of narrative constructions. Both were facilitated by the introduction of digital technologies that would come to fully define the commercial cinema and new media alternatives after 2000.

On the one hand, movies began to drift away from a traditional focus on engrossing narrative and instead emphasized sensational mise-en-scène or dramatic manipulations of the film image. In this context, conventional realism gave way to intentionally artificial and spectacular representations of characters, places, and actions. Playful films like *Who Framed Roger Rabbit* (1988) allowed cartoon characters to interact with human ones. Computer-generated imagery (CGI) was used to introduce spectacular effects in *Tron* (1982) and, beginning with Pixar's *Toy Story* (1995), to generate entire films.

On the other hand, movies that emphasized narrative engagement often intentionally fragmented, reframed, or distorted the narrative

in ways that challenged its coherence. Movies like Quentin Tarantino's *Pulp Fiction* (1994) and Paul Thomas Anderson's *Magnolia* (1999) interlocked story lines across different timelines and locations. Christopher Nolan's *Inception* (2010) reconstructed narrative through the shifting landscapes of different dream realities in which the protagonist steals secrets from the subconscious of adversaries [Figure 2.28 on p. 64].

2.28 ***Inception*** (2010). In this mind-game film about dreams and realities, Dom Cobb (Leonardo DiCaprio) steals secrets from the minds of others. The story follows Cobb as he traverses many "layers" of dreams, resulting in an intricate and often mind-bending narrative structure.

The Commercial Auteur

The combination of the New Hollywood's recognition of the auteur and its commercial orientation resulted in a relatively new formation in Hollywood moviemaking — the idea of the auteur, most often the director, as a brand. We can pinpoint three signature films of this period as evidence of this phenomenon: Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* (1982), David Lynch's *Blue Velvet* (1986), and Quentin Tarantino's *Pulp Fiction* (1994). Each of these films is a dramatic visual and narrative experiment that investigates the confusion of human identity, violence, and ethics at the end of the twentieth century. In *Blade Runner*, Deckard (played by Harrison Ford) hunts down androids in a dark and visually complex dystopia where technology creates beings who are "more human than human." With *Blue Velvet*, Lynch fashions a nightmarish version of small-town America in which Jeffrey, the protagonist, discovers violence seething throughout his everyday community and his own naive soul. In *Pulp Fiction*, where violence is also a measure of human communication, the narrative follows the unpredictable actions and reflections of two hit men who philosophically meditate out loud about the Bible, loyalty, and McDonald's hamburgers **[Figure 2.29]**.

2.29 *Pulp Fiction* (1994). The running commentary of the hit men played by John Travolta and Samuel L. Jackson marks this as a Quentin Tarantino film.

These filmmakers are able to produce such daring and disturbing projects and successfully distribute them within mainstream film culture in part because their own personae become part of what is marketed. The prominence of the director in driving movie commerce has taken on even higher financial stakes as studio film budgets have soared. This is nowhere more evident than in the career of James Cameron. Although its huge budget, innovative technology, and massive promotional campaign helped make *Titanic* (1997) one of the highest-grossing films in both United States and worldwide box-office history, Cameron's "brand" was also key to the film's success and helped pave the way for the even more grandiose *Avatar* (2009) and *Alita: Battle Angel* (2019).

American Independent Cinema

The promotion of a director's unique vision also helped independently financed films to gain visibility in the 1980s, opening up pathways to female and nonwhite filmmakers. New York–based writer-directors committed to their own visions — like Susan Seidelman (*Desperately Seeking Susan*, 1985) and Spike Lee (*She's Gotta Have It*, 1986) — earned critical praise and audience attention. Seidelman's film featured Madonna just as her career took off, and Lee's stylish and engaging film announced an important voice in American cinema and catalyzed a wave of African American films in the 1990s. Working through his production company, 40 Acres and a Mule, Lee addressed political issues in American history in *Malcolm X* (1992) and *BlacKkKlansman* (2018) **[Figure 2.30]**, chronicled race relations in *Do the Right Thing* (1989), and promoted the careers of young women of color like Darnell Martin, who directed *I Like It Like That* (1994).

2.30 *BlacKkKlansman* (2018). Spike Lee confronts the racial violence of the 1970s in this drama about an undercover infiltration of the KKK by a white detective and a black colleague.

In 1989, the success of Steven Soderbergh's *sex, lies, and videotape* at both the Cannes and Sundance film festivals marked a new era of American independent filmmaking, with Sundance successes attracting industry interest. Independent feature films — such as Todd Solondz's *Welcome to the Dollhouse* (1995) and Mary Harron's *American Psycho* (2000) — are often noted for controversial subject matter and dark tone. Distributors like Miramax developed an aggressive marketing model for these edgy films, and the expansion of art-house cinemas outside university towns helped build a viable independent sector in the 1990s. Stars were drawn to independent films for challenging roles and awards prospects. Some observers lamented the incorporation of the movement into business as usual, as Hollywood studios began to distribute and develop independent films through specialty divisions.

But with their low budgets and openness to first-time directors, independent films offered many opportunities for marginalized groups. Chinese American Wayne Wang launched his significant filmmaking career with *Chan Is Missing* (1982), and playwright and director Luis Valdez looked at Chicano history in *La Bamba* (1987). The first feature film by and about Native Americans, *Smoke Signals* (1998), directed by Chris Eyre and written by Sherman Alexie,

provided a gently funny picture of the contradictions of contemporary Native American life.

Women filmmakers also carved out a place in independent filmmaking. Allison Anders connected with audiences in films based on her own experiences, such as *Gas Food Lodging* (1992), and films based on the experiences of other girls and women, such as *Mi Vida Loca* (*My Crazy Life*) (1993). Julie Dash's *Daughters of the Dust* (1991) became the first feature by an African American woman to be released nationally in theaters. A prize winner for its cinematography at Sundance, it later inspired the visual style of Beyoncé Knowles's *Lemonade* (2016).

Independent feature film producer Christine Vachon was central to the 1990s phenomenon known as New Queer Cinema. This efflorescence of feature films, daring in form and subject matter, proved there was a viable theatrical market for work by and about lesbians and gay men. Vachon's company Killer Films brought to the screen Rose Troche and Guinevere Turner's lesbian romance *Go Fish* (1994); Kimberly Peirce's debut drama based on the murder of young transman Brandon Teena, *Boys Don't Cry* (1999); and numerous features by Todd Haynes, including the critically acclaimed *Far from Heaven* (2002) and *Carol* (2015).

A diversity of voices emerged in independent filmmaking during these decades, energized by politics (including AIDS activism) and

the affordability of video technology. The audiences most receptive to these voices were incorporated into an increasingly specialized view of the filmgoing public — corresponding to developments in cable "narrowcasting" in the 1990s.

From National to Transnational Cinema in Europe

As Hollywood blockbusters pushed local films off movie screens in many countries, European film industries focused on what makes their products aesthetically distinctive, at the same time enacting funding, import and export, and distribution policies to keep them competitive. State-subsidized film industries sustained the work of auteur directors through movies made for national television and through international coproduction agreements. An increasingly efficient circuit of film festivals offered outlets for exhibition and exposure to critical attention, and awards and prizes distinguished such films from their Hollywood counterparts.

New German Cinema

A unique mix of government subsidies, international critical acclaim, domestic television broadcast, and worldwide film festival exposure established **New German Cinema** as an integral product of West Germany's national culture. Although extraordinarily vital and stylistically diverse, this cinema often confronts Germany's Nazi and

postwar past, approached directly or through an examination of the contemporary political and cultural climate, and emphasizes the distinctive, often maverick, visions of individual directors.

Alexander Kluge, one of the political founders of New German Cinema, used modernist film practices to question the interpretation of history in *Yesterday Girl* (1966). Before his death at age thirty-six, Rainer Werner Fassbinder, perhaps the movement's most celebrated and its most prolific director, made more than forty feature films. The first and best known among his influential trilogy about postwar Germany, *The Marriage of Maria Braun* (1979), adapts the Hollywood melodrama to tell of a soldier's widow who builds a fortune in the aftermath of the war **[Figure 2.31]**. By 1984, Edgar Reitz's sixteen-hour television series *Heimat* (1984), in part a response to the American television miniseries *Holocaust* (1978), demonstrated that the cultural silence about the Nazi era had definitively been broken.

2.31 ***The Marriage of Maria Braun*** (1979). Rainer Werner Fassbinder made forty feature films in a short career as one of the most celebrated representatives of New German Cinema. This historical drama featuring frequent Fassbinder star Hanna Schygulla was one of his most commercially successful films.

On the international stage, however, the hallmark of New German Cinema was less its depiction of historical, political, and social questions than the distinctive personae and filmic visions of its most celebrated participants. The visionary Wim Wenders, the driven Werner Herzog, and the enormously productive, despotic, and hard-living Fassbinder were easily packaged as auteurs with outsized personalities. Wenders's films, including *Alice in the Cities* (1974) and *Wings of Desire* (1987), are philosophical reflections on the nature of the cinematic image and the encounter between Europe and the United States. Herzog's *Aguirre: The Wrath of God* (1972) and *Fitzcarraldo* (1982) are bold depictions of extreme cultural

encounters set in Latin American jungles. As these and other successful directors began to work abroad and as wider social shifts and changes in cultural policy took place in Germany, the heyday of New German Cinema came to an end. In the 1980s, domestic audiences welcomed comedies like Doris Dörrie's *Men* (1985). The industry underwent changes after the fall of the Berlin Wall and the establishment in 1992 of the European Union. With Tom Tykwer's hit *Run Lola Run* (1998) and Fatih Akin's *The Edge of Heaven* (2007) and *In the Fade* (2017), German films again achieved wide international recognition.

African Cinema

African cinema encompasses an entire continent and many languages, cultures, and nations, each with varying levels of economic development and infrastructure. An initial distinction can be made between the longer history of North African cinema and the more recent emergence of sub-Saharan African cinema.

North Africa was more smoothly integrated into international film culture. The Lumière brothers' Cinématographe debuted in Egypt in 1896, and after the introduction of sound, a commercial industry developed in Egypt that still dominates the movie screens of Arab countries. Youssef Chahine, working both in popular genres and on more political and personal projects (in which he sometimes appeared), was a cosmopolitan presence in Egyptian cinema from

the 1950s to his death in 2008. His autobiographical trilogy, beginning with *Alexandria … Why?* (1979), is notable for its humor, frank approach to sexuality, and inventive structure. Meanwhile, in recent Tunisian production, art films predominate, several of which are directed by or tell the stories of women. Moufida Tlatli's *The Silences of the Palace* (1994) opens in the postindependence period and follows a young woman singer as she remembers her girlhood as a palace servant. Many prominent filmmakers from Tunisia, Morocco, and Algeria have received training or financing from France, which allows for high production values and distribution abroad but also depends on their countries' colonial past.

Taking shape in the 1960s after decolonization and often linked to the political and aesthetic precepts of Third Cinema, sub-Saharan African cinema encompasses the relatively well-financed francophone, or French-language, cinema of West Africa; films from a range of anglophone, or English-speaking, countries; and films in African languages such as Wolof and Swahili. Although it is difficult to generalize about this rapidly expanding film culture, some of its most influential features and shorts have been united by a focus on social and political themes rather than commercial interests and by an exploration of the conflicts between tradition and modernity.

At the forefront of this vital development is the most respected proponent of African cinema, Senegalese filmmaker Ousmane Sembène, who in 1966 directed sub-Saharan Africa's first feature

film, *Black Girl*, with extremely limited technical and financial resources. The film, based on Sembène's own novel, follows a young woman who travels from Dakar, Senegal, to Monte Carlo, France, to work with a white family as a nanny. She soon becomes disillusioned with her situation, which leaves her trapped in the home, cooking and cleaning. Her French voiceover records her alienation and her increasing despair. Simply composed long shots depict her as enclosed and restricted by her surroundings **[Figure 2.32]**. Although he made only eight features before his death in 2007, Sembène's films are remarkable for their moral vision, accessible storytelling, and range of characters. His protagonists represent aspects of traditional and modern African life without becoming two-dimensional symbols. Other internationally known francophone filmmakers include Idrissa Ouedraogo from Burkina Faso (*Tilai*, 1990) and Souleymane Cissé (*Finye*, 1982; *Yeelen*, 1987) and Abderrahmane Sissako (*Life on Earth*, 1998; *Bamako*, 2006) from Mali. Sissako's films have been hailed as exquisite commentaries on the effects of globalization on Africa.

2.32 ***Black Girl*** (1966). Simple long shots and a stark mise-en-scène depict the young woman's sense of entrapment and alienation.

Chinese Cinema

Chinese cinema poses its own challenge to models of national cinema because it includes films from the "three Chinas" — the People's Republic of China (Communist mainland China); the island of Hong Kong, which reverted to Chinese sovereignty in 1997 after being under British control since 1842; and the Republic of China (the island of Taiwan, settled by nationalists at the Communist Party takeover of China in 1949). Each of these areas developed under a

different social and political regime, so the industries vary greatly in terms of commercial structure, degree of government oversight, audience expectations, and even language. Yet they all share a cultural history and are increasingly economically interdependent.

Film in the People's Republic of China

In mainland China after the 1949 Communist Revolution, cinema production was nearly halted and limited to propaganda purposes. It was further disrupted during the Cultural Revolution in the 1960s, when leader Mao Zedong referred to American films as "sugar-coated bullets." It was not until the 1980s that a group of filmmakers emerged, the so-called Fifth Generation (referring to their class at the Beijing Film Academy), who were interested both in the formal potential of the medium and in critical social content. Two characteristics stood out: ordinary protagonists and an emphasis on rural or historical subjects filmed with great beauty.

The enthusiastic reception given to *Yellow Earth* (1985) at international film festivals made director Chen Kaige and cinematographer Zhang Yimou the most acclaimed filmmakers of this movement. With Zhang's directorial turn came a series of lush, sensuous films featuring Gong Li, an unknown actress who became an international film star. Zhang's films *Ju dou* (1990) and *Raise the Red Lantern* (1991) **[Figure 2.33]** were the targets of censorship at home and the recipients of prizes abroad. The strong aesthetic

vision of Fifth Generation films, stemming from the filmmakers' experiences growing up as marginalized artists during the Cultural Revolution, made a critical statement in its own right.

2.33 ***Raise the Red Lantern*** (1991). Gong Li became an international art-film star in the films of Fifth Generation Chinese director Zhang Yimou.

VIEWING CUE

Compare at least two films from the same movement (such as New German Cinema or Hong Kong New Wave). Do the characteristics discussed in this chapter apply?

After the violent suppression of protests in Tiananmen Square in 1989, a new underground film movement emerged in the People's Republic of China. The work of the so-called Sixth Generation was

characterized by the exploration of controversial themes in contemporary urban life and by production without official approval. For example, Zhang Yuan's *East Palace, West Palace* (1996) was mainland China's first film about gay life.

Hong Kong Cinema

After the phenomenal international success of low-budget Hong Kong kung-fu films in the 1970s, the sophisticated style of the Hong Kong New Wave led by producer-director Tsui Hark exploded on the scene. These Hong Kong films were known for expensive production methods and a canny use of Western action elements. Director John Woo became internationally known for his technical expertise and visceral editing of violent action films like *The Killer* (1989). Along with legendary stunt star Jackie Chan, Woo brought the Hong Kong style to Hollywood in such films as *Face/Off* (1997).

The stylish, even avant-garde work of Wong Kar-wai told quirky stories of marginal figures moving through a postmodern, urban world, photographed and edited in a distinctive style that finds beauty in the accidental and the momentary. *Happy Together* (1997) is the ironic title of a tale of two men drifting in and out of a relationship, set in a Buenos Aires that is not so different, in its urban anxiety, from the men's home of Hong Kong. Wong's *In the Mood for Love* (2000) is set in the 1960s among cosmopolitan former

residents of Shanghai who are trying to establish a pattern of life in Hong Kong [Figure 2.34].

2.34 ***In the Mood for Love*** (2000). In this film by Hong Kong auteur Wong Kar-wai, stylish characters make chance connections amid the urban alienation of Hong Kong.

Taiwan Cinema

Two contemplative family sagas by acclaimed auteurs of the new Taiwan cinema — Hou Hsiao-hsien's *A City of Sadness* (1989) and Edward Yang's *Yi yi* (2000) — reflect on the identity of contemporary Taiwan. Influenced by mainland China (where much of its population and nationalist government come from), Japan (which ruled the island from 1895 to 1945), and the West (with which it

trades), Taiwan cinema had little chance to explore indigenous culture onscreen before the lifting of martial law in 1987. Although these directors were heralded by international critics, their films often were less successful at home than U.S. and Hong Kong films.

Iranian Cinema

Although many Chinese films have achieved strong commercial as well as critical success internationally, Iranian cinema is especially notable for receiving festival prizes and critical acclaim abroad. The art films of this Islamic nation are characterized by spare pictorial beauty, often of landscapes or scenes of everyday life on the margins, and an elliptical storytelling mode that developed in part as a response to state regulation. Meanwhile, the thriving domestic industry favors more populist melodramas.

Following the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran, cinema was attacked as a corrupt Western influence and movie theaters were closed, but by the 1990s, both a popular cinema and a distinctive artistic film culture developed. The latter became a way to enhance Iran's international reputation, especially during the more moderate rule of Mohammad Khatami from 1997 to 2005. Films by such directors as Abbas Kiarostami and Mohsen Makhmalbaf became the most internationally admired and accessible expressions of contemporary Iranian culture as well as some of the most highly praised examples of global cinema. In Kiarostami's *Taste of Cherry*

(1997), beautiful, barren landscapes are the settings for wandering characters' existential conversations. Jafar Panahi's popular *The White Balloon* (1995) depicts a little girl's search for a goldfish. Rural settings and child protagonists helped filmmakers avoid the censorship from religious leaders that contemporary social themes would attract. These strategies also evaded strictures forbidding adult male and female characters from touching — a compromise that at least avoided offering a distorted picture of domestic and romantic life. Asghar Farhadi's *The Salesman* (2016), which revolves around a Tehran production of Arthur Miller's 1949 play *Death of a Salesman*, draws out the international dialogue and subsequent stress within Iranian cinema, as they accent the strained private space of a marital crisis.

More recently, however, filmmakers have used the international approval accorded Iranian films to tackle volatile social issues such as drugs and prostitution in portrayals of contemporary urban life. Panahi's *The Circle* (2000), banned in Iran, focuses on the plight of women, some of whom find prison a refuge. Makhmalbaf's *Kandahar* (2000) depicts the situation of neighboring Afghanistan just before that country became the focus of international attention and the target of a U.S.-led military campaign **[Figure 2.35]**. These depictions of controversial issues have tested the limits of the government's tolerance. In December 2010, Panahi was sentenced to a six-year jail term and banned from making films for twenty years by Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's regime. Released from prison but with

the threat still looming, he has defied the ban by making modest films like *Taxi* (2015), which he shot in his car as he impersonates a cab driver and discusses his situation with family members (see Chapter 8).

2.35 ***Kandahar*** (2000). Mohsen Makhmalbaf's film explores the volatile social issues in Afghanistan just prior to the U.S.-led military campaign there.

One of the most interesting apparent contradictions in Iranian cinema is the success of women filmmakers. Strict religious decrees require that female characters be portrayed with their heads covered and forbid a range of onscreen behaviors, including singing. Nevertheless, many Iranian women filmmakers have achieved prominence behind the camera. The prolific Tahmineh Milani was arrested for her film *The Hidden Half* (2001), and Samira Makhmalbaf (daughter of Mohsen Makhmalbaf) made her first

feature film, *The Apple* (1998), when she was only eighteen. Perhaps the most visible example of Iranian feminist perspectives is the French animated film *Persepolis* (2007) by Vincent Paronnaud and Marjane Satrapi, based on the latter's graphic novel about her girlhood in Iran **[Figure 2.36]**.

2.36 ***Persepolis*** (2007). Marjane Satrapi's autobiographical graphic novel satirizes the Islamic Revolution in Iran. The film adaptation, made with Vincent Paronnaud in France, was not looked on favorably in the country of her birth.

In each of these examples of film cultures at the end of the twentieth century, we can see the role played by cinema's powerful images and narratives in defining and challenging national and regional identities. With the further incorporation of digital technologies in the twenty-first century, cinema continues to define and be defined by globalization.

Cinema in the Digital Era (2000–present)

Cinema in the twenty-first century has built on many trends that emerged in the late twentieth century, with some key new features tied to the adoption of digital technology at the largest and smallest scales. The year 2000 saw the introduction of industry standards for the commercial exhibition of films digitally, and by 2016, 98 percent of the world's screens had been digitized. Moreover, nearly 80 percent of top-grossing Hollywood films were shot on digital formats. At the other end of the scale, new technology made some productions far more affordable. Independent filmmaker Sean Baker used an iPhone to make his award-winning theatrical feature *Tangerine* (2015), and a vast range of media producers and cultures overcame distances and format differences to circulate entertainment, political media, and artwork over global networks.

Rapidly changing technologies that were developed in the late twentieth century reshaped film viewing and audience engagement. Starting in the 1980s, home video, DVD, and Blu-ray sales made it possible for viewers to own and watch films repeatedly and selectively, piecing together narrative strands of complex works and forming communities with like-minded viewers. Cable and, later, online streaming services made the viewing experience both more

intentional and more fragmented. Because of these changing habits, marketing tactics became increasingly particularized. At the same time, audiences could drive more diverse representation by making their tastes and interests known. Most significantly, the 2000s ushered in a rapid process of **media convergence** by which formerly distinct media (such as cinema, television, the internet, and video games) and viewing platforms (such as TV, computers, and cell phones) have become interdependent. As media content is linked across platforms through digitization, convergence allows media conglomerates and service providers to maximize and profit from their contact with consumers, but it also engages audiences directly in the circulation and recombination of media.

Global Hollywood

Evolving digital technologies are on constant display in high-budget, visual effects–driven franchises. Sequels, animation, and superhero films have become formulas for Hollywood success abroad, including in the rapidly expanding Chinese market. The popularity of the *Transformers* series (2007–2018) in East Asia drives the continued production of those films, perhaps more than the U.S. market does. Corporations like Disney now earn more revenue internationally than from the U.S. theatrical release of their films, creating a pervasive brand presence. Sequels of popular properties like the Marvel Cinematic Universe play to built-in audiences and increasingly vocal fandoms around the world, minimizing risk for

unprecedentedly expensive productions and maximizing audience awe with special-effects innovations.

The Chinese market, in particular, drives certain decisions by U.S. production companies because of its enormous size and revenue potential. For example, in the Marvel comic book adaptation *Doctor Strange* (2016), a U.S. production by Disney, a character named the Ancient One — who, in the comics, is a Tibetan man — was reimagined as a white character played by Tilda Swinton. This decision was reportedly motivated by the desire of Disney executives to avoid alienating Chinese audiences over ongoing tensions in China regarding the political status of Tibet. Although this is a particularly striking example of a U.S. production company making decisions with a particular overseas market in mind, similar decisions are relatively common as a result of Hollywood's increasingly global presence.

Diversifying Screens

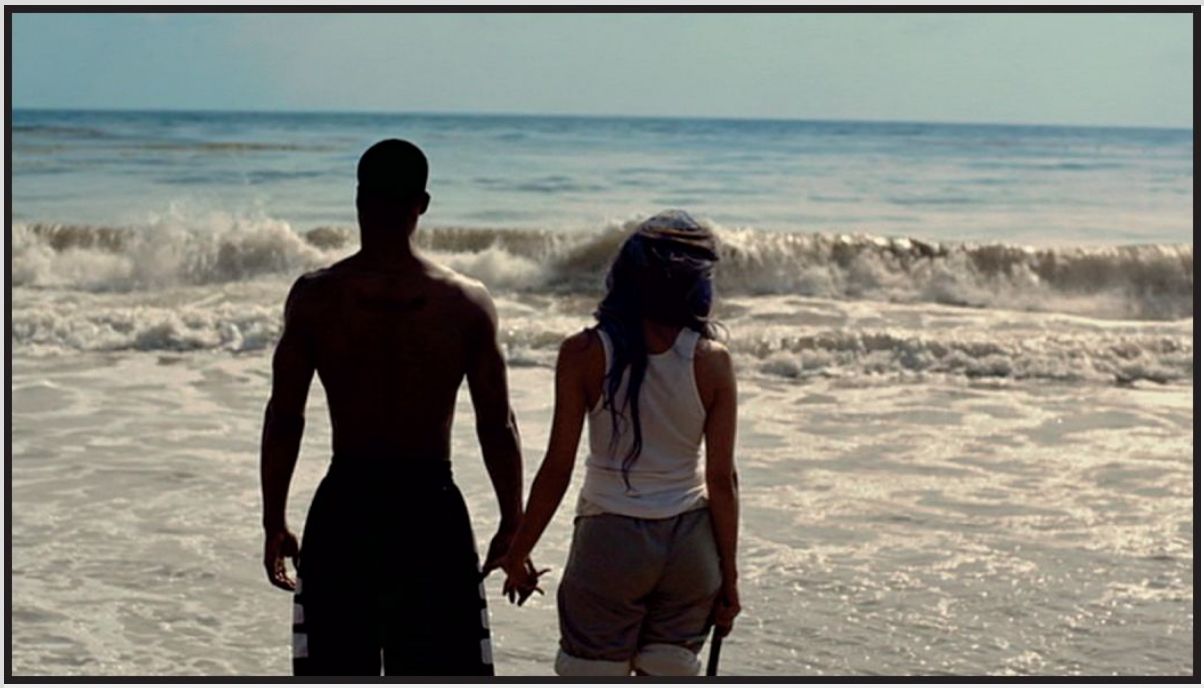
Despite its record box-office take and the worldwide conversion to digital projection launched by James Cameron's *Avatar* (2009), the Academy Award for best director that year went to Kathryn Bigelow, the first woman to receive the honor. Conversations about diversity and inclusion familiar in independent sectors increasingly targeted mainstream films, where women and people of color remain underrepresented both on-and offscreen. Women directed only 8

percent of the 250 top-grossing films in the United States in 2018, for example. Wide protests against all-white slates of Oscar acting nominees prompted the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences to invite hundreds of new members to help diversify the voting pool, which nevertheless remained 84 percent white and 69 percent male in 2019.

In contrast to the edgy, action-oriented films of Bigelow, women directors' successes often remained tied to genres considered typically female. Screenwriter turned director Nora Ephron mastered the romantic comedy formula in *Sleepless in Seattle* (1993) and continued to focus on women's themes in *Julie & Julia* (2009). Nancy Meyers (*It's Complicated*, 2009; *The Intern*, 2015) was well established as a writer and producer before turning to directing, making films aimed comfortably at female audiences.

Women directors such as Mira Nair (*The Namesake*, 2006), Sofia Coppola (*The Bling Ring*, 2013), and Greta Gerwig (*Lady Bird,* 2017; *Little Women,* 2019) established the critical and commercial success needed to sustain high-profile careers, and many more are making their mark, including women of color like Gina Prince-Bythewood (*Love & Basketball*, 2000; *Beyond the Lights*, (2014) **[Figure 2.37]**, and Karyn Kusama (*Jennifer's Body*, 2009; *The Invitation*, 2016). Palestinian American director Cherien Dabis, whose *Amreeka* (2009) **[Figure 2.38]** is a modest immigration tale about a Palestinian mother working at a Midwestern fast-food place, examines the

merging and clashing of two cultures. Maryam Touzani's first directorial feature *Adam* (2019), a slow-paced film about the developing bond between two Moroccan women, was one of several successful films directed by women at the 2019 Cannes Film Festival.



2.37 ***Beyond the Lights*** (2014). Gina Prince-Bythewood's romantic drama looks at a budding romance through the lens of music industry pressures and prejudices.

2.38 ***Amreeka*** (2009). A Palestinian American family experiences life in suburban Chicago.

Director Lisa Cholodenko's incisive comedy about lesbian parenting, *The Kids Are All Right* (2010), appealed to crossover audiences with prominent stars in the main roles, anticipating the success of the summer love story between two young men in *Call Me by Your Name* (2017) **[Figure 2.39]**. The films' success corresponded to unprecedented changes in American public opinion on LGBT issues in the 2000s, culminating in the 2015 Supreme Court decision legalizing marriage between same-sex couples.

2.39 ***Call Me by Your Name*** (2017). An Academy Award winner for writer James Ivory, this film sets its coming-of-age story of two gay lovers in rural Italy.

VIEWING CUE

LaunchPad

Go to **launchpadworks.com** to view the clip from Gina Prince-Bythewood's *Beyond the Lights* (2014). How do dialogue and form position the black woman protagonist? How do you think this relates to the unique perspective of a black woman director behind the camera?

The first decades of the 2000s saw commercial and political gains in black cinema. Playwright-producer-actor-director Tyler Perry's comedies achieved spectacular success with African American audiences. *Diary of a Mad Black Woman* (2005) introduced his signature character, no-nonsense grandmother Madea (played by a cross-dressing Perry), to the screen. More than a dozen films have followed, grossing half a billion dollars at the box office. Perry and Oprah Winfrey also helped promote a very different kind of black story: Lee Daniels's drama *Precious: Based on the Novel 'Push' by Sapphire* (2009), a devastating and yet soaring story of an overweight young woman's life of physical, emotional, and sexual abuse. Ava DuVernay became one of the most high-profile black women directors within the industry with the historical drama *Selma* (2015) and the first to receive an Oscar nomination with the documentary *13th* (2016). Several films — *Selma; Lee Daniels' The Butler* (2013),

about an African American man's career in the White House; Steve McQueen's Oscar-winning *12 Years a Slave* (2013), the harrowing story of a free black man who was kidnapped into slavery in 1841; and Nate Parker's cinematic telling of the Nat Turner slave rebellion, *The Birth of a Nation* (2016) — contributed to important shifts in the national conversation about the country's racial past that occurred under the Barack Obama presidency.

Proliferating social media platforms (like Twitter) and television formats (like reality television) stoked public interest in celebrity culture. Although this type of convergence serves media conglomerates in influencing markets and consumer options, its innovations allow audiences to communicate and make connections between media representations and social movements and invite artists to experiment with different forms of expression and outreach. One example is HBO's hour-long film *Lemonade* (2016), which coincided with the surprise internet launch of Beyoncé Knowles's album of the same name. A collaboration with multiple visual and musical artists, the film explores black women's cultural heritage. The scope and ambition of the project were matched in its release strategy. Publicity and clips spread the visual and musical elements rapidly through social media, and the film was released on streaming services after its debut on cable television and packaged with the music for download and physical purchase. Such innovations in media genres and modes of consumption and distribution urge new definitions of film and the film experience.

Film Culture in the Twenty-First Century

Providing alternatives to Hollywood, world film culture in the twenty-first century depends increasingly on international financing and the circulation of films through networks of festivals, where prizes and reviews help publicize the films, their directors, and the cultures from which they originate. Extensive coverage of festivals through online blogs and media outlets increases public awareness of the diversity of film culture, and digital media allows for the widespread accessibility of films and film history via the internet. Both auteurs and national and regional film movements come to the fore in this context, giving access to viewers worldwide.

Transnational Europe

From Europe, Fatih Akin's films, including *The Edge of Heaven* (2007) **[Figure 2.40]**, explore the cultural interpenetration of Germany and Turkey, and Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck's Academy Award–winning *The Lives of Others* (2006) shows life under state surveillance in the former East Germany. Austrian director Michael Haneke's often-disturbing films — including *Caché* (2005), *Amour* (2012), and *Happy End* (2017) — make the conflicts and tensions of the recent European past resonate in the present.

2.40 *The Edge of Heaven* (2007). Several of Fatih Akin's films address clashes between German and Turkish cultures in the lives of their characters.

Originating with a group of Danish filmmakers, the Dogme movement is a keen example of the branding and transnational flow of film culture in this period. Announced at a 1995 Paris film festival, the Dogme 95 manifesto included a list of rules for a new realism and authenticity in filmmaking. The first film to receive a Dogme certificate, Thomas Vinterberg's *The Celebration* (1998), used low-end digital cameras for a visceral immediacy, and the aesthetic was embraced by filmmakers around the world. At the same time, Danish films — ranging from Lars von Trier's controversial *Antichrist* (2009) and *Melancholia* (2011) to Susanne Bier's Academy Award–winning drama *In a Better World* (2010), about a Danish doctor who works in Africa and his son's rebellion at home — received exposure

unusual for a small country. As Bier's film illustrates, globalization is reflected in both the subject matter and the model of financing of much of European cinema today.

After the founding of the European Union in 1993, transnational and supranational film production structures became prominent. For example, the collaborative Ibermedia fund, originating in Spain, has facilitated the completion of hundreds of Latin American films since its founding in 1996, including the Claudia Llosa's Oscar-nominated *The Milk of Sorrow* (2009), a stylistically innovative exploration of the legacy of violence against indigenous women in postconflict Peru [Figure 2.41].

2.41 ***The Milk of Sorrow*** (2009). Claudia Llosa's drama became the first Peruvian film to be nominated for the Foreign Language Film Academy Award in the United States.

East Asian Cinemas

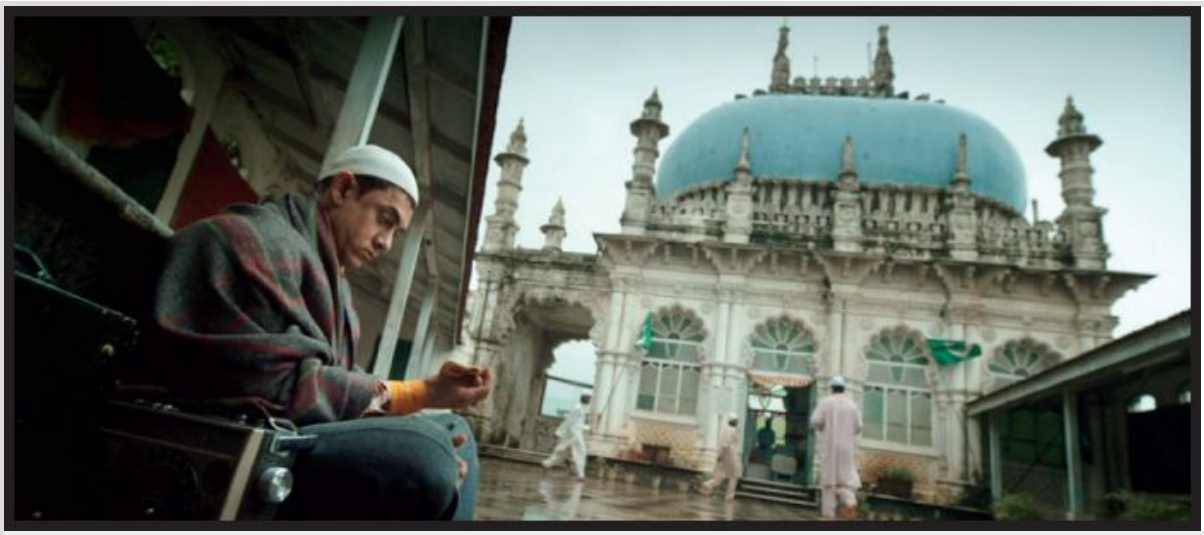
Many of the most celebrated directors and national movements in world cinema in the 2000s originated in East Asia. As China emerged as the most important export market for film, it also stepped up production and collaborations with filmmaking talent in Hong Kong, like auteur Wong Kar-wai's martial arts epic *The Grandmaster* (2013). More modest in scale and critical of rapid development in China, the work of the "urban generation" of mainland Chinese filmmakers was made possible by digital cameras and incorporates documentary aesthetics. The most internationally acclaimed filmmaker of this group, Jia Zhangke, was granted state approval for the first time to make his fourth feature, *The World* (2004), which depicts the uprooted lives of young employees at a Beijing theme park in heartbreaking, wry visual compositions. Taiwan auteur Tsai Ming-liang produced *Café Lumière* (2003) in Japan. The director's formal precision, such as very long takes often deployed to convey a pervasive melancholy, is indebted to Japanese director Yasujiro Ozu. Alongside the international reputations of its auteurs, Taiwan saw domestic audiences return to locally made films, responding to the pop star cast of *Cape No. 7* (2008). In Korea, a cinema renaissance in the 2000s saw domestic films regularly outperform Hollywood, with directors like Park Chan-wook (*Oldboy*, 2003; *The Handmaiden*, 2016) and Bong Joon-ho (*The Host*, 2006; *Okja*, 2017; and Cannes Palme d'Or winner *Parasite*, 2019 [**Figure 2.42**]) becoming cult figures and making forays into English-language production.

2.42 *Parasite* (2019). Bong Joon-ho's films exemplify the transnational dynamics of twenty-first century cinema. His award-winning *Parasite* was funded by both Korean and U.S. companies, and his previous film *Okja* (2017) was distributed to a global audience on Netflix.

Global Bollywood

In the 2000s, film production and distribution in India continued to operate outside Hollywood influence, and the internet allowed Indian cinema's global reach to reach a massive South Asian diasporan audience and to introduce new viewers to Bollywood-style entertainments. Actor and producer Shah Rukh Khan skyrocketed to popularity in such films as *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge* (*The Big-Hearted Will Take the Bride*) (1995) and *Om Shanti Om* (2007), with a fan base numbering in the billions. The cricket film *Lagaan: Once upon a Time in India* (2001) capitalized on the international popularity of Indian cinema to bid for attention from more mainstream critics and audiences in North America and the United Kingdom. This strategy became more successful throughout the

decade with international hits like *PK* (2014) **[Figure 2.43]**. The transnational dimension of Indian film also can be seen in movies directed by filmmakers of the Indian diaspora. For example, Gurinder Chadha's *Bride & Prejudice* (2004) — an adaptation (with musical numbers) of Jane Austen's 1813 novel *Pride and Prejudice* — and Mira Nair's award-winning *Monsoon Wedding* (2001) borrow some of the visual and narrative tropes of Bollywood cinema. In 2008, when *Slumdog Millionaire*, British director Danny Boyle's film about a Mumbai street kid turned game-show contestant, won the Oscar for best picture, the international influence of Indian cinema could not be contested.



2.43 ***PK*** (2014). This Bollywood-produced science fiction comedy became one of India's biggest-ever box-office hits in 2014 — and became the first Indian movie to gross over $10 million in North America.

African Film in the Age of Video

Also able to counter Hollywood with domestic audiences is the Nigerian film industry, known as **Nollywood**, which witnessed a stunning boom beginning in the 1990s. Driven by the hunger of audiences for African-produced images that are relevant to their lives, Nollywood produces popular genre films such as Tunde Kelani's *Arugbá* (2010) **[Figure 2.44]**. Bridging the gap between francophone art cinema and popular African entertainment and funded by a fraction of typical Hollywood filmmaking costs (averaging $25,000), Nollywood films are shot and distributed on video, essential on a continent that lacks Western-style film studios and movie theaters. In 2006, Nollywood overtook Hollywood and Bollywood in terms of the number of films released annually, attracting audiences at film festivals and in diasporic communities across the globe. Best-known films include Kelani's *Thunderbolt: Magun* (2000) and Kunle Afolayan's *The Figurine: Araromire* (2009), among others.

2.44 ***Arugbá*** (2010). Veteran Nigerian filmmaker Tunde Kelani's film, which depicts the issues facing an accomplished young woman selected to participate in the annual community festival, was embraced by critics and audiences but economically undermined by video piracy.

Because of the limited financial and technical resources for film production, distribution, and exhibition, the Pan-African Film and Television Festival of Ouagadougou (FESPACO) in Burkina Faso has been a vital spur to African film culture. Filmmakers from all over the continent and the African diaspora meet at the festival, held every other year, to show and view others' work and to strategize about how to extend the cinema's popular influence. The shift to digital production has significantly affected undercapitalized industries in Ghana, Congo, Zimbabwe, South Africa, and elsewhere in Africa.

The internet makes information about films, filmmakers, institutions, festivals, and history much more accessible all over the globe. Distribution remains a challenge, with uneven access, insufficient bandwidth for streaming film content in many areas, and piracy and copyright concerns. But new technologies allow students to research film culture and expand their film experience like never before.

TECHNOLOGY IN ACTION

Film Preservation and Archives

This chapter's overview of global film history mentions only a tiny fraction of the films that have been produced over 125 years. Of those films, many no longer exist. Films were considered an ephemeral entertainment in the early days of the medium, heavy and costly to ship back to their producers and bulky to store. Moreover, they were dangerous. The nitrate base of the film stock used on virtually all films made before the 1950s was extremely flammable and susceptible to decomposition. Many films were lost to the ages. Today, preserving the material history of cinema requires skills and resources in film preservation, storage, access, and information science that are provided by a network of moving image archives worldwide.

Digital technologies expedite the transfer, storage, and circulation of original film and have enabled studios and other commercial interests to retrieve material for which there is a market interest "from the vaults." But this is not a solution to the challenges of preserving the breadth and variety of our movie past. For one thing, digital storage also can degrade over time. Historians and audiences need to have access to materials in their original format, both as viewing experiences and as artifacts.

The importance of archives and preservation is especially vital to silent film history because 80 percent of our silent film heritage is believed to be lost. Kevin Brownlow and David Gill's 1981 restoration of Abel Gance's epic *Napoléon* (1927) is a complex and particularly sensational example of restoration. Frustrated with the tattered versions of this silent French classic, Brownlow pursued the confused history of the film, searching out different versions from private and public archives and eventually patching together an accurate reproduction of the film for a highly publicized tour in 1981. In 2016, Brownlow's ongoing efforts resulted in a definitive digital version of Gance's over five-hour film.

LaunchPad

Go to **launchpadworks.com** to visit LaunchPad for *The Film Experience* and read about orphan films, which do not have copyright holders.

The preservation movement may highlight films that have been neglected by canonical film histories and need to be recovered materially as well as critically, such as Dorothy Arzner's *Working Girls* (1931) and Micheaux's *Within Our Gates* (1920; see the Film in Focus in this chapter). In 1990, Martin Scorsese established the Film Foundation with a group of fellow filmmakers to support restoration efforts for American films. Hundreds of projects have been completed, including a restoration of *The Night of the Hunter* (1955) — a dark, offbeat tale of a religious con man pursuing his two stepchildren and a hidden stash of money **[Figure 2.45a]**. In 2007, the World Cinema Foundation expanded this effort. The foundation has preserved crucial films from India, the Philippines, Mexico, and Senegal since its first project, the documentary *Trances* (1981) by Moroccan filmmaker Ahmed El Mannouni **[Figure 2.45b]**.

2.45a ***The Night of the Hunter*** (1955). This dark fable was restored with the support of Martin Scorsese and The Film Foundation.

2.45b *Trances* (1981). This documentary about the Moroccan band Nass El Ghiwane was the first film preserved by the World Cinema Foundation.

FILM IN FOCUS Rediscovering *Within Our Gates* (1920)

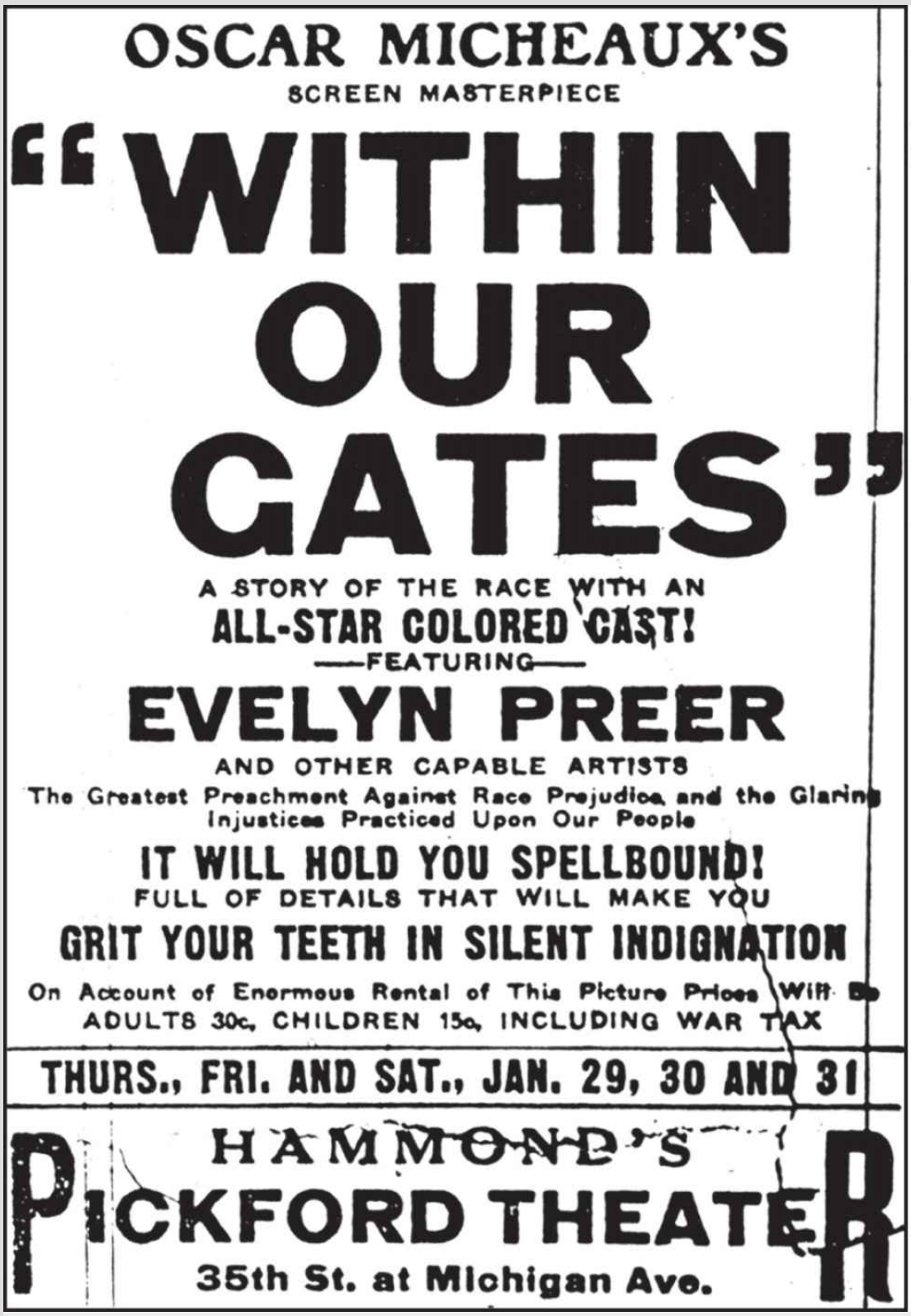
See also: *Where Are My Children?* (1916) and *Salomy Jane* (1914)

FILM IN FOCUS
LaunchPad

To watch a clip from *Within Our Gates* (1920), go to LaunchPad for *The Film Experience* at **launchpadworks.com**

Oscar Micheaux's *Within Our Gates* (1920) is a crucial film in the counterhistory of American cinema because of its content, its circumstances of production and

reception, and its fate **[Figure 2.46]**. Produced independently in 1919 and released in 1920, it is the earliest surviving feature film by an African American filmmaker. Despite its historical significance, however, the film was lost for decades. Greeted with controversy on its initial release, it came back into circulation in the 1990s after the Library of Congress identified a print titled *La Negra* in a film archive in Spain as Micheaux's lost film and then restored it. The film's recovery was part of the efforts of film historians and black cultural critics to reinvestigate the vibrant world of early-twentieth-century race movies and the remarkable role that Micheaux played in this culture. The film's long absence from the historical record deprived generations of viewers and cultural producers of a picture of African American life and politics in the North and South during that era and of awareness of the audience that Micheaux addressed.



Courtesy Oscar Micheaux Society, Duke University, with thanks to Jane Gaines

2.46 ***Poster for Within Our Gates*** (1920). Oscar Micheaux's rediscovered film about the lives and philanthropic work of middle-class African Americans provoked controversy

for its dramatic scenes of lynching.

Description
The poster reads, Oscar Micheaux's Screen masterpiece "Within Our Gates," A story of the race with an all-star colored cast! Featuring Evelyn Preer and other capable artists, The greatest preachment against race prejudice and the glaring injustices practiced upon our people, It will hold you spellbound! Full of details that will make you Grit your teeth in silent indignation, on account of enormous rental of this picture prices with adults 30 c, children 15 c, including war tax., Thursday, Friday and Saturday, January 29, 30 and 31. Hammond's Pickford Theater, thirty-fifth Street at Michigan Avenue.

Within Our Gates is important to an alternative film history because it offers a corrective view of a devastating historical phenomenon — the lynching of African Americans, which had reached epidemic proportions in the first decades of the twentieth century. When the film was returned to circulation in the 1990s, viewers immediately saw it as a countervision to D. W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation*, which boldly uses cinematic techniques like parallel editing to tell the inflammatory story of a black man pursuing a white virgin, who commits suicide rather than succumb to rape. The Ku Klux Klan is formed to avenge her death, and the would-be rapist is captured and punished in what the film depicts as justified vigilante justice.

Micheaux offers an equally visceral story that counters the myth of lynching as a reaction to black male violence by presenting a testament to white racist mob violence against African Americans. After an African American tenant farmer, Jasper Landry, is unjustly accused of shooting the wealthy landowner Girdlestone (the guilty party is actually an angry white tenant), a lynching party attacks Landry's family. *Within Our Gates* poignantly depicts the lynching of the mother and father and the last-minute escape of their small son as a public spectacle attended by the townspeople, including women and children. This powerful sequence stands as perhaps the strongest cinematic rebuttal to *The Birth of a Nation*'s racist distortion of history. It uses the power of the visual to make history,

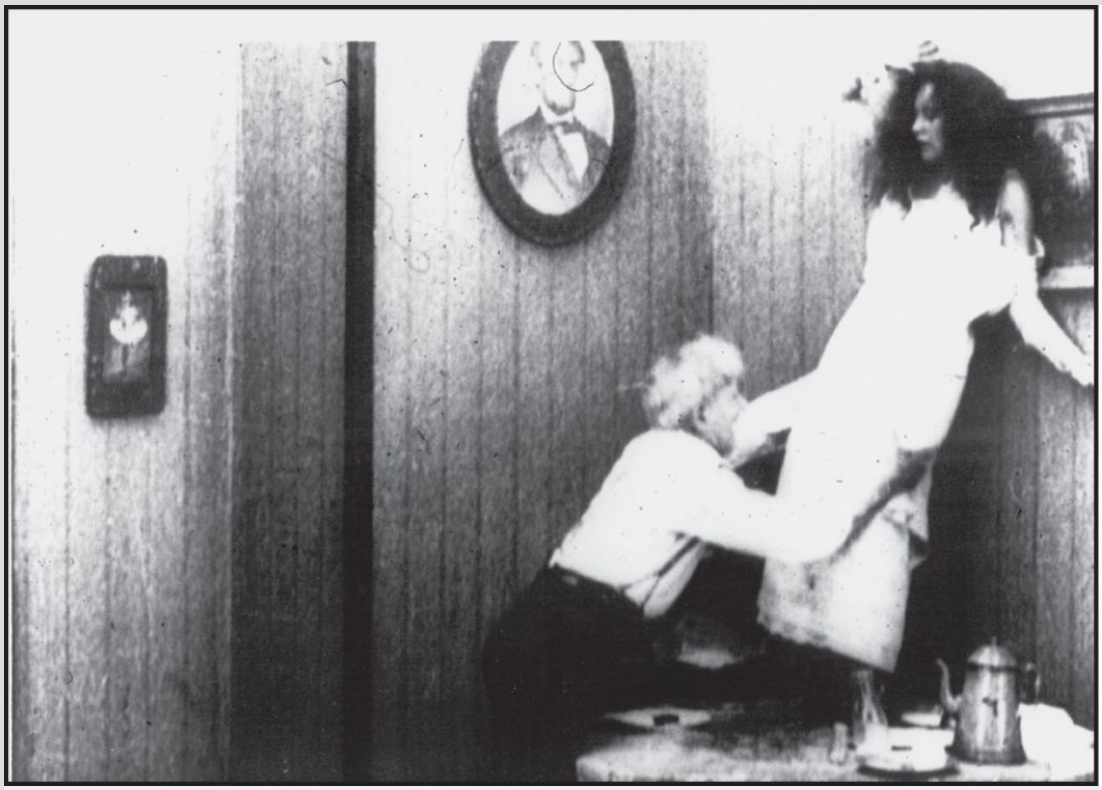
just as Griffith's film does. Finally, as a director, Micheaux offers an important contrast to Griffith. Whereas Griffith has long been heralded as a father of American cinema, Micheaux's diverse talents, his unique approach to film language, his business savvy, and his modernity have waited decades for full recognition.

The structure of Micheaux's film also rewards historical inquiry because it requires viewers to think about how certain modes of storytelling become naturalized. Although *Within Our Gates*'s treatment of lynching is its most noted feature, this controversial material, which threatened to prevent the film's exhibition in Chicago where racial tensions had recently erupted in rioting, is buried in an extensive flashback. The flashback fills in the past of Sylvia Landry, described by a title card as someone "who could think of nothing but the eternal struggle of her race and how she could uplift it." The language of racial uplift directly addresses the racially conscious, middle-class black audiences for Micheaux's film. Sylvia's quest to raise funds for a black school in the South, her romance with the politically active Dr. Vivian, and several side plots featuring less noble characters make the lynching story at the film's heart feel even closer to the historical record **[Figure 2.47]**. The story serves a didactic purpose in the film — demonstrating the racial injustice that propels Sylvia's struggle.

Courtesy Oscar Micheaux Society, Duke University, with thanks to Jane Gaines

2.47 *Within Our Gates* (1920). In the framing story of Oscar Micheaux's film, Dr. Vivian hears the story of Sylvia Landry's past.

But the film does not spare melodramatic detail. The inclusion of white male violence against black women is another rebuttal of the distortions in *The Birth of a Nation*. We learn that Sylvia, the Landrys' adopted daughter, escapes the lynch mob only to be threatened with rape by landowner Girdlestone's brother **[Figure 2.48]**. The attack is diverted when the would-be rapist notices a scar that reveals she is actually his daughter. The improbability of the rescue scenario can be understood as the use of melodramatic coincidence to right wrongs that cannot easily receive redress in other ways. In other words, Micheaux uses the form of the movies to imagine social reality differently.



Courtesy Oscar Micheaux Society, Duke University, with thanks to Jane Gaines

2.48 *Within Our Gates* (1920). In the flashback, a last-minute coincidence saves the heroine from assault by a white man who is revealed to be her biological father.

Micheaux's films were made with extreme ingenuity on low budgets. When Micheaux's affecting melodrama of African American hardship and determination disappeared from film history, a great deal was lost. The film's subject matter was not undertaken in mainstream cinema. The perspective of African American filmmakers was absent in Hollywood, and black audiences were marginalized by Hollywood films. The title *Within Our Gates* speaks to the film's own status — a powerful presence within American film history that was too long unacknowledged. Preserved by the Library of Congress Motion Picture Conservation Center and contextualized by the scholarship of black film historians like Pearl Bowser, *Within Our Gates* will remain a touchstone of American cultural history.

Chapter 2 Review

SUMMARY

- Studying film history requires an awareness of film **historiography**, the study of the methods and principles through which we organize the past. One common way of organizing film history is **periodization**, which divides film into historical segments.

- The silent cinema period lasted from 1895 until roughly 1929. The first section of this period, until roughly 1915, is known as **early cinema** and was notable for (1) the shift from single to multiple shots and (2) the invention of continuity editing and variations in camera distance.

  - During the later part of the silent period, Hollywood underwent three major changes: the standardization of film production; the establishment of the feature film; and the cultural and economic expansion of movies throughout society.

  - **German expressionist cinema** focused on the dark fringes of human experience, as embodied in lighting, sets, and costume design.

    - Soviet silent films focused on documentary and historical subjects, and presented a political concept of film centered on audience response.

- Sound was introduced in 1927 and brought about the "classical" period of cinema, which lasted until 1945. Sound led to more elaborate dialog and to the rise of genres as a way of constructing narrative films.

    - During this time, the Hollywood studio system reached its peak. The U.S. Motion Picture Production code was adopted in 1934, establishing guidelines for depictions of crime and sex.

    - In France, the classical period featured two influential movements: **French impressionist cinema** and **poetic realism**.

- Many national and international film movements emerged out of World War II during the period from 1945 to 1975.

    - The Hollywood studio system weakened due to shifting economic patterns among consumers and the 1948 Supreme Court decision *United States v. Paramount Pictures, Inc.* As suburbs boomed and multiplexes proliferated, Hollywood began aggressively marketing to teenage viewers, as well as to African American audiences with **blaxploitation** films.

    - **Italian neorealism** depicted postwar social crises using a stark, realistic style. It helped inspire "new wave"

movements in many countries, including the **French New Wave, British New Wave, Czech New Wave** , and Brazilian **Cinema Novo**. Though different from each other, these movements generally shared two common features: (1) a break with past filmmaking institutions and genres and (2) the use of film to express personal vision.

  - In India, **Bollywood** became a major creative and economic force and, by 1970, overtook Hollywood as the most prolific film industry in the world.

  - **Third Cinema** refers to a movement of films, mainly produced in Third World countries, that challenged both Hollywood and the elitist aesthetics of independent cinema and sought to use film to express the voice of the people.

- The period from 1975 to 2000 saw many economic, political, and technological changes that both consolidated U.S. dominance in global film markets and fostered a flourishing of film in many other countries.

  - In the 1970s, Hollywood shifted back toward commercial blockbusters. This shift led to the rise of the commercial auteur and to the rapid growth of American independent cinema.

  - A number of youth-driven new wave movements, including **New German Cinema**, emerged in Europe and elsewhere as a counterpoint to Hollywood.

    - Iranian cinema, Chinese cinema, and cinemas in various African countries also flourished during this period.
- In the twenty-first century, Hollywood further expanded its reach into global markets amid rapid technological changes: most notably the spread of online streaming services and a widespread shift in viewing habits from movie theaters to private homes.
    - India's Bollywood has continued to expand, as have independent cinemas in Europe, Asia, and Africa (including Nigeria's **Nollywood**).
- Although we can't come close to covering every film industry or movement, this chapter attempts to give an overview of global film history, including the intersection of cultural history and film history and a look at how filmmakers of different genders, races, and nations have continually offered new insights into how we inhabit our histories.

KEY TERMS

historiography
periodization
canon
nickelodeon
early cinema
race movies

benshi
German expressionist cinema
French impressionist cinema
poetic realism
blaxploitation
Italian neorealism
French New Wave
auteur theory
British New Wave
Czech New Wave
Cinema Novo
anime
Bollywood
Third Cinema
New German Cinema
media convergence
Nollywood

LaunchPad

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PART TWO FORMAL COMPOSITIONS
film scenes, shots, cuts, and sounds

Credit: Summit Entertainment/Photofest

CHAPTER 3

Mise-en-Scène: Exploring a Material World

- Settings and sets
- Actors and performance styles
- Costumes and make-up
- Lighting

CHAPTER 4
Cinematography: Framing What We See
- Camera angle, height, and perspective
- Framing, depth of field, and camera movement
- Visual effects and digital technology

CHAPTER 5
Editing: Relating Images
- Organization through editing
- Construction of spatial and temporal relationships
- Graphic and rhythmic relations
- Continuity and disjunctive editing

CHAPTER 6
Film Sound: Listening to the Cinema
- Interactions between sound and image
- Speech, music, and sound effects
- Diegetic and nondiegetic sound

To some extent, every movie mimics how we use our senses to experience the real world. Film studies examines the ways that movies activate our senses through specific formal systems: mise-en-scène, cinematography, editing, and sound. In *Broken Blossoms* (1919), D. W. Griffith uses composition to create the claustrophobic sensations of being physically trapped in a small room. *La La Land* (2016), a romantic tale about an aspiring actress and a jazz pianist, moves across Los Angeles — the freeways, the Hollywood hills, studio backlots, and small music clubs — to transform those spaces and places into theatrical

stages for a contemporary musical fantasy. By invigorating and manipulating the senses, film images and sounds create experiences viewers recognize and respond to — physically, emotionally, and intellectually.

The next four chapters identify the formal and technical powers associated with four different categories of film form. Chapter 3 on mise-en-scène explores the roles played by sets, props, and other onscreen elements. Chapter 4 examines cinematography — the art of how films are shot. Chapter 5 looks at film editing, and Chapter 6 focuses on film sound. Each chapter begins with a short historical overview of the element and then details the properties and strategies associated with each of these aspects of film form. Chapters conclude with an examination of how some of the scenes, shots, cuts, and sounds are used to guide our reactions to and interpretations of movies.

CHAPTER 3 MISE-EN-SCÈNE
Exploring a Material World

Description

The first still shows the protagonist, Watney, standing amidst a row of cultivated potatoes inside his Mars station. The second still shows Watney in a space suit outside a Mars Ascent Vehicle (MAV). The third still shows a spaceship from above the surface of Mars.

Ridley Scott's *The Martian* (2015) could be described as a film about the desperate need to explore and reconstruct an adequate mise-en-scène. A sci-fi tale of an astronaut mistakenly assumed dead and abandoned on Mars in 2035, this film presents Matt Damon as the astronaut who must find a way to survive in a barren climate that lacks enough oxygen or resources to sustain human life. A botanist by training, Damon responds by ingeniously constructing a sustainable home from the shelter and materials left behind on the planet. He builds a survival set where he can artificially manufacture food and air and later travels to a former Mars probe, where he modifies its windows, nose cone, and panels in order to fly it to a dangerous rendezvous in space. In an unaccommodating outer space, the film explores and celebrates one man's heroic ability to create another material space and mise-en-scène as a reconstructed world that allows him to survive.

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A French term meaning literally "placement in a scene" or "onstage," **mise-en-scène** (pronounced *meez-on-sen*) refers to all the elements of a movie scene that are organized, often by the director,

to be filmed and that are later visible onscreen. It includes actors, lighting, sets, costumes, make-up, and other features of the image that exist independently of the camera and the processes of filming and editing. Cinema orchestrates a rich and complex variety of formal and material elements inherited from theater, using principles of composition derived from painting and photography.

Outside the movies, our surroundings function like a mise-en-scène. The architecture of a town might be described as a public mise-en-scène. How a person arranges and decorates a room could be called a private mise-en-scène. Courtrooms construct a mise-en-scène that expresses institutional authority. The placement of the judge above the court, of the attorneys at the bar, and of the witnesses in a partially sequestered area expresses the distribution of power. The flood of light through the vast and darkened spaces of a cathedral creates an atmospheric mise-en-scène aimed at inspiring contemplation and humility. The clothes, jewelry, and make-up that a person chooses to wear are, in one sense, the functional costuming all individuals don as part of inhabiting a particular mise-en-scène: businessmen wear suits, clergy dress in black, and service people in fast-food restaurants wear uniforms with company logos. This chapter describes how mise-en-scène organizes and directs much of our film experience by putting us in certain places and by arranging the people and objects of those places in specific ways.

We respond to the sensations associated with physical settings and material surfaces and objects in many ways. Whether we actually touch the materials or simply imagine their texture and volume, this tactile experience of the world is a continual part of how we engage with and understand the people and places around us. This is also the case with the movies. Characters attract or repulse us through the clothing and make-up they wear. In *Some Like It Hot* (1959), Marilyn Monroe's eroticism is inseparable from her slinky dresses. In the Swedish film *Border* (2018), the drama hinges on customs agent Tina's strange appearance and her gradual realization that she is, in fact, a troll rather than a human **[Figure 3.1]**.

3.1 ***Border*** (2018). In many films, make-up accentuates features of the character. Here the extraordinary make-up (nominated for an Academy Award) becomes the center of the character's complicated identity and her realization of that identity.

Actions set in open or closed spaces can generate feelings of potency or hopelessness. In *Lawrence of Arabia* (1962), the open

desert shimmers with possibility and danger, whereas in *Room* (2015), a kidnapped woman and her young son born in captivity are held prisoner in a small room from which there seems to be no escape, and the viewer experiences their extreme and frightful claustrophobia **[Figure 3.2]**. In *Vertigo* (1958), viewers share the perspective of the protagonist when he relives again and again the dizzying fear of heights that he first experiences when he watches a partner fall from a roof. These feelings can be culturally modified, influenced, or emphasized in very different ways by specific films.

3.2 ***Room*** (2015). The film's confined setting becomes a formal structure and a visceral experience for the protagonist, played by Brie Larson.

The artistic precedent for cinematic mise-en-scène is the theatrical stage, where the sensual and tactile engagement of audience members is based on the presence of real actors performing in real time on a physical stage. Film engages us in a different way. A film's material world may be actual objects and people set in authentic

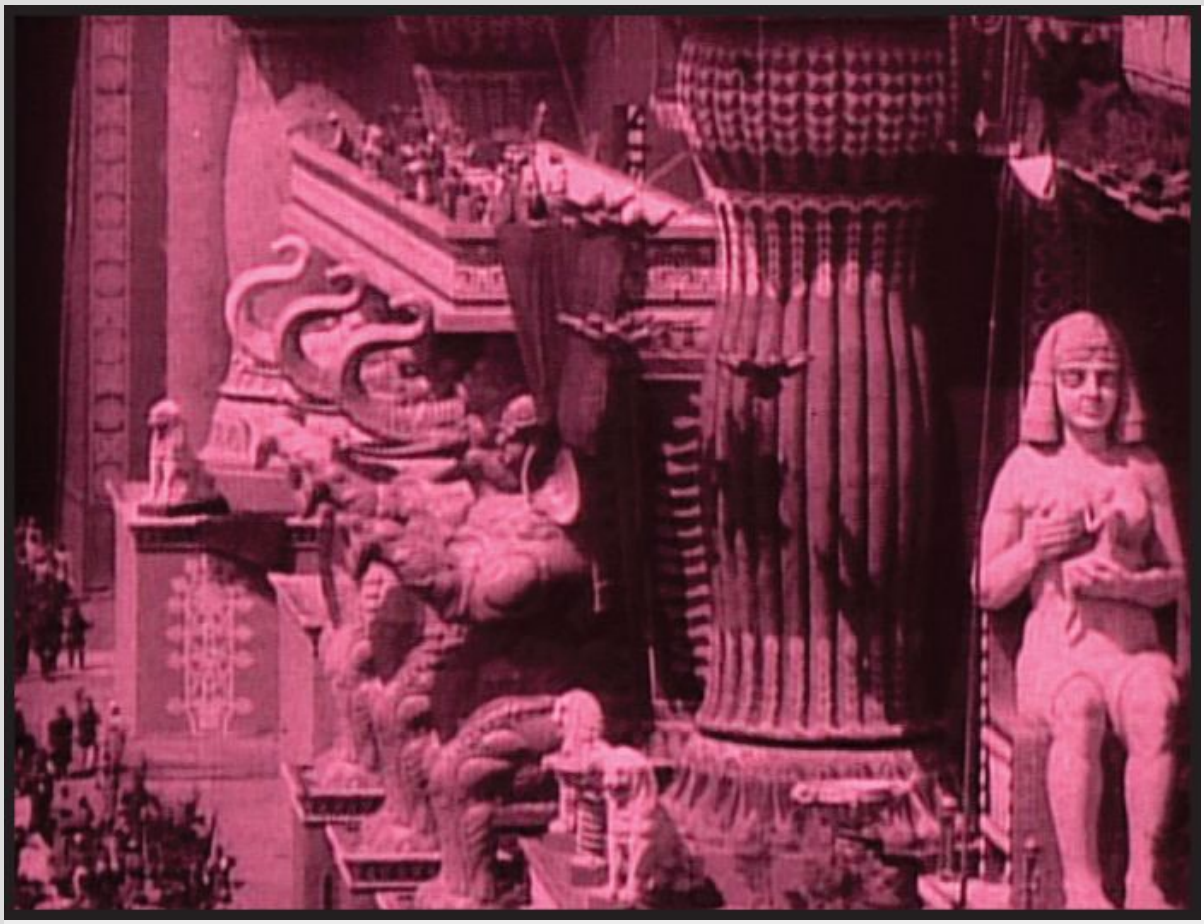
locations, like the stunning wilderness vistas captured in *The Revenant* (2015). Or it may include objects and settings constructed by set designers to appear realistic or fantastic, as in Tim Burton's *Alice in Wonderland* (2010) with its living cards and unusual creatures. In all its variation, mise-en-scène — a film's places and spaces, people and objects, lights and shadows — is a key dimension of our movie experience.

KEY OBJECTIVES

- Define *mise-en-scène*, and identify how theatrical and other traditions affect the history of cinematic mise-en-scène.
- Describe how settings and sets relate to a film's story.
- Summarize the ways props, costumes, and make-up shape our perception of a character.
- Explain how lighting is used to evoke particular meanings and moods.
- Explain how actors and performance styles contribute to mise-en-scène.
- Compare and contrast the various ways in which mise-en-scène directs our interpretation.

A Short History of Mise-en-Scène

The first movies were literally "scenes." Sometimes they were quaint public or domestic scenes, such as pioneer filmmakers Auguste and Louis Lumière's films of a baby being fed or a pillow fight. Often they were dramatic scenes re-created on a stage for a movie camera. Soon movies like *The Automobile Thieves* (1906) and *On the Stage; or, Melodrama from the Bowery* (1907) began to coordinate two or three interior and exterior settings, using make-up and costumes to create different kinds of characters and exploiting the stage for visual tricks and gags. In D. W. Griffith's monumental *Intolerance* (1916), the sets that reconstructed ancient Babylon were, in many ways, the main attraction **[Figure 3.3]**. In the following section, we sketch some of the historical paths associated with the development of cinematic mise-en-scène throughout more than a century of film history.



3.3 ***Intolerance*** (1916). The film's massive Babylonian set became a Los Angeles tourist attraction until it was dismantled in 1921.

Theatrical Mise-en-Scène and the Prehistory of Cinema

The clearest heritage of cinematic mise-en-scène lies in the Western theatrical tradition that began with early Greek theater around 500 BCE and evolved through the nineteenth century. Stages served as places where a community's religious beliefs and truths could be acted out. Non-Western theatrical traditions, such as Sanskrit

dramas in India, also flourished in the millennia before cinema. All of these dramatic forms featured recognizable characters in familiar plots. During the European Renaissance of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, the addition of sets, costumes, and other physical elements reflected a secular world of politics and personal relationships. Similarly, Japanese kabuki — which appeared in the seventeenth century — incorporated often elaborate costumes, props, and make-up. Through these elements of mise-en-scène, individuals and communities fashioned their values and beliefs.

By the beginning of the nineteenth century, lighting and other technological developments rapidly altered the nature of mise-en-scène and set the stage apart from the audience, anticipating the cinema. In contrast to the drawing-room interiors that had prevailed before, lighting grew more elaborate and professional, and stages and sets grew much larger and more spectacular, sometimes with massive panoramic scenery and machinery. In the nineteenth century, an emphasis on individual actors, such as Fanny and John Kemble and Ellen Terry in England, influenced the rising cult of the star, who became the center of the mise-en-scène.

1900–1912: Early Cinema's Theatrical Influences

The subjects of the first films were limited by their dependence on natural light. But by 1900, films revealed their theatrical influences. *The Downward Path* (1901), a melodrama familiar from the popular stage, used five tableaux — brief scenes presented by sets and actors as "pictures" of key dramatic moments — to convey the plight of a country girl who succumbs to the wickedness of the city. Further encouraging this theatrical direction in mise-en-scène was the implementation of mercury-vapor lamps and indoor lighting systems around 1906 that enabled studio shooting. By 1912, one of the most famous stage actors of all time, Sarah Bernhardt, was persuaded to participate in the new medium and starred in the films *Queen Elizabeth* (1912) and *La dame aux camélias* (1912). Besides legitimate theater, other aspects of nineteenth-century visual culture influenced the staging of early films. The famous "trick" films of Georges Méliès, with their painted sets and props, were adapted from magicians' stage shows. In the United States, Edwin S. Porter's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1903) imitated the staging of familiar scenes from the "Tom shows," seemingly ubiquitous regional adaptations for the stage of Harriet Beecher Stowe's antislavery novel.

1915–1928: Silent Cinema and the Star System

The 1914 Italian epic *Cabiria*, which included a depiction of the eruption of Mount Etna, established the public's taste for movie

spectaculars. Feature-length films soon became the norm, and elaborately constructed sets and actors in carefully designed costumes defined filmic mise-en-scène **[Figure 3.4]**. By 1915, art directors or set designers (at the time, called *technical directors* who did *interior decoration*) became an integral part of filmmaking. The rapid expansion of the movie industry in the 1920s was facilitated by the rise of studio systems in Hollywood, Europe, and Asia. Studios had their own buildings and lots on which to construct expansive sets and their own personnel under contract to design and construct them. Erich Kettelhut's famous futuristic set designs for Fritz Lang's film *Metropolis* (1927), constructed on the soundstage of the German UFA studios, were influenced by the modernist architecture of the Manhattan skyline.

3.4 ***The Sheik*** (1921). The charismatic power of silent film star Rudolph Valentino is often linked to the romanticized Western notions of North Africa and the Middle East that were created through set and costume design.

1930s–1960s: Studio-Era Production

The rapid introduction of sound at the end of the 1920s was facilitated by the stability of the studio system, in which a company controlling film production and distribution had sufficient capital to invest in production facilities and systems. **Soundstages** were large soundproofed buildings designed to house the construction and movement of sets and to capture sound and dialogue during filming. Art directors were essential to a studio's signature style. During his

long career at MGM, Cedric Gibbons was credited as art director on 1,500 films, including *Grand Hotel* (1932), *Gaslight* (1944), and *An American in Paris* (1951). He supervised a large number of personnel charged with developing each film's ideal mise-en-scène from the studio's resources. Producer David O. Selznick coined the title *production designer* for William Cameron Menzies's central role in creating the look of the epic *Gone with the Wind* (1939), from its dramatic historical sets, décor, and costumes to the color palette that would be highlighted by the film's Technicolor cinematography.

Studio backlots enabled the construction of entire worlds — the main street of a western town or New York City's Greenwich Village, for example. Other national cinemas invested considerable resources in central studios. Cinecittà ("cinema city") was established by Italian dictator Benito Mussolini in 1937, bombed during World War II, then rebuilt and used for Italian and international productions. The expense lavished on mise-en-scène during the heyday of the studio system shapes contemporary expectations of "movie magic."

1940–1970: New Cinematic Realism

Photographic realism and the use of exterior spaces and actual locations — identifiable neighborhoods and recognizable cultural sites — complement cinema's theatrical heritage. Although the Lumières' earliest films were of everyday scenes and their

operatives traveled all over the world to record movies, location shooting did not influence mainstream filmmaking until World War II. Italian neorealist films were shot on city streets to capture the immediacy of postwar lives (and because refugees were housed in the Cinecittà studios). Ever since, fiction and documentary filmmaking have come to depend on location scouting for suitable mise-en-scène. *Naked City* (1948) returned U.S. filmmaking to the grit of New York's crime-ridden streets. Realistic mise-en-scène was central to many of the new cinema movements of the 1970s that critiqued established studio styles, including in the postrevolutionary cinema in Cuba and the emergence of feature-filmmaking in sub-Saharan Africa in such films as Ousmane Sembène's *Xala* (1975).

1975–Present: Mise-en-Scène and the Blockbuster

Since the mechanical shark (nicknamed "Bruce") created for Steven Spielberg's *Jaws* in 1975, the economics of internationally marketed blockbuster filmmaking have demanded an ever more spectacular emphasis on mise-en-scène. The cinematic task of re-creating realistic environments and imagining fantastical mise-en-scène has shifted to computerized models and computer-graphics technicians, who design the models to be digitally transferred onto film. *Pan's Labyrinth* (2006) portrays the internal world of its lonely child heroine in a rich mise-en-scène constructed from actual sets,

costumes, prosthetics, and computer-generated imagery **[Figure 3.5]**. Films may benefit from the technical capacity of computers to re-create the exact details of historical eras, such as the nineteenth-century New York streets of Martin Scorsese's *Gangs of New York* (2002). Many contemporary audiences look for and many contemporary movies provide an experience that is "more real than real," to adapt the motto of the Tyrell Corporation in *Blade Runner* (1982).

3.5 ***Pan's Labyrinth*** (2006). A girl's fantasy life is rendered in a combination of computer-generated imagery and constructed mise-en-scène.

The Elements of Mise-en-Scène

Describe, with as much detail as possible, one of the sets or settings in a movie you watch for class. Other than the actors, which features of the film seem most important? Explain why.

In this section, we identify the elements of mise-en-scène and introduce some of the central terms and concepts underpinning the notion of mise-en-scène. These include settings and sets, props, actors, costumes, and lighting — and the ways that all of these important elements contribute to scenic and atmospheric realism and are coordinated through design and composition.

Settings and Sets

Settings and sets are the most fundamental features of mise-en-scène. The **setting** is a fictional or real place where the action and events of the film occur. The **set** is, strictly speaking, a constructed setting, often on a studio soundstage, but both the setting and the set can combine natural and constructed elements. For example, one setting in *Citizen Kane* (1941) is a Florida mansion, which, in this

case, is a set constructed on an RKO soundstage and based on the actual Hearst estate in San Simeon, California.

Working within the production designer's vision, members of the art department construct sets and arrange props within settings to draw out important details or to create connections and contrasts across the different places in a film. An especially complex example is *Birdman* (2014), which shifts between the stage sets and rooms inside a New York theater and the streets outside the theater in a manner that may indicate a realistic setting or a setting marked as fantasy.

Historically and culturally, sets and settings have changed regularly. The first films were made either on stage sets or in outdoor settings, using the natural light from the sun. Films gradually began to integrate both constructed sets and natural settings into the mise-en-scène. Today's cinematic mise-en-scène continues to use constructed sets, such as the studio creation of the detective's residence for *Sherlock Holmes* (2009), as well as actual locations, such as the Philadelphia streets and neighborhoods of *The Sixth Sense* (1999) or the deserts and dusty streets of Jordan (standing in for Iraq) in *The Hurt Locker* (2008). Models and computer enhancements of mise-en-scène are used increasingly, notably in science fiction and fantasy films like *Interstellar* (2014), which uses a mixture of practical and digital effects to depict space and time travel **[Figure 3.6]**.

3.6 ***Interstellar*** (2014). Location shooting and visual effects together create the mise-en-scène of a desolate, distant planet.

Scenic Realism and Atmosphere

VIEWING CUE

LaunchPad

Go to **launchpadworks.com** to watch the clip from *Life of Pi* (2012) without sound. What is communicated through the elements of the mise-en-scène alone?

Settings and sets contribute to a film's mise-en-scène by establishing scenic realism and atmosphere. **Realism** is an artwork's quality of conveying a truthful picture of a society, person, or some other dimension of everyday life. It is the term most viewers use to describe the extent to which a movie creates a truthful picture. The word *realism* — one of the most common, complicated, and elusive yardsticks for the cinema — can refer to psychological or emotional accuracy (in characters), recognizable or logical actions and developments (in a story), or convincing views and perspectives of those characters or events (in the composition of the image).

The most prominent vehicle for cinematic realism, however, is the degree to which mise-en-scène enables us to recognize sets and settings as accurate evocations of actual places. A combination of selection and artifice, **scenic realism** is the physical, cultural, and

historical accuracy of the backgrounds, objects, and other figures in a film. For example, *Glory* (1989), a Civil War film telling the story of the first African American regiment of the U.S. Army, drew on the expertise of historian Shelby Foote for the physical, historical, and cultural verisimilitude of the sets and setting [Figure 3.7]. Recognition of scenic realism frequently depends on the audience's historical and cultural point of view. *The Blind Side* (2009), for example, set in an affluent American suburb, may seem realistic to many Americans but could appear to be a fantastic other world to farmers living in rural China.

3.7 ***Glory*** (1989). The scenic realism of this Civil War drama enhances the effect of its story of the first African American regiment's bravery.

In addition to scenic realism, the mise-en-scène of a film creates atmosphere and connotations, those feelings or meanings

associated with particular sets or settings. The setting of a ship on the open seas might suggest danger and adventure; a kitchen set may connote comfortable, domestic feelings. Invariably these connotations are developed through the actions of the characters and developments of the larger story. The early kitchen set in *Mildred Pierce* (1945) creates an atmosphere of bright but slightly strained warmth. In *E.T.: The ExtraTerrestrial* (1982), a similar set describes the somewhat chaotic space of a modern, single-parent family. In *The Favourite* (2018), the splendor of the eighteenth-century court of Queen Anne evokes an emotional luxury and material excess that acts as the ideal stage for an extreme emotional and political competition between two powerful women **[Figure 3.8]**.

3.8 ***The Favourite*** (2018). Palatial splendor creates a surreal atmosphere in which the characters compete for power and control.

Props, Costumes, and Lights

As we have seen, unlike other dimensions of film form such as editing and sound, mise-en-scène was in place with the first films, so the early decades of film history were explorations in how to use the materials of mise-en-scène. Here we examine the multiple physical objects and figures that are the key ingredients in a cinematic mise-en-scène, moving from inanimate objects and human figures to the accentuation of those figures and objects with costumes and lighting.

Props

A **prop** — short for *property* — is an object that functions as a part of the set or as a tool used by the actors. Props acquire special significance when they are used to express characters' thoughts and feelings, their powers and abilities in the world, or the primary themes of the film. In *Singin' in the Rain* (1952), when Gene Kelly transforms an ordinary umbrella into a gleeful expression of his new love, an object that normally protects a person from rain is expressively used in a dance: the pouring rain makes little difference to a man in love **[Figure 3.9]**. In Alfred Hitchcock's *Suspicion* (1941), a glass of milk, brought to a woman who suspects her husband of murder, suddenly crystallizes the film's unsettling theme of malice hiding in the shape of innocence. Even natural objects or creatures can become props that concentrate the

meanings of a movie. In *E.T.: The Extraterrestrial*, a flower withers and then revives when the alien does. When E.T. takes the flower with him on the spaceship, it signals an ongoing connection with the children who gave it to him.

3.9 *Singin' in the Rain* (1952). An ordinary umbrella is transformed into a dancing prop, expressing how Gene Kelly's new love can transform a rainy world and all its problems into a stage for an exuberant song and dance.

Props appear in movies in two principal forms. Instrumental props are objects displayed and used according to their common function. Metaphorical props are those same objects reinvented or employed

for an unexpected, even magical, purpose — like Gene Kelly's umbrella — or invested with metaphorical meaning. The distinction is important because the type of prop can characterize the kind of world surrounding the characters and the ability of those characters to interact with that world. In *Babette's Feast* (1987), a movie that uses the joys and generosities of cooking to bridge cultural and other differences in a small Danish village, a knife functions as an instrumental prop for preparing a meal **[Figure 3.10]**. In *Psycho* (1960), that same prop (a knife) is transformed into a hideous murder weapon and a ferocious sexual metaphor **[Figure 3.11]**. *The Red Shoes* (1948) might be considered a film about the shifting status of a prop, red dancing slippers. At first, these shoes appear as an instrumental prop serving Victoria's rise as a great ballerina, but by the conclusion of the film, they have been transformed into a darkly metaphorical prop that magically dances the heroine to her death.

3.10 ***Babette's Feast*** (1987). In this movie about the joys and generosities of cooking, a kitchen knife is a simple instrumental prop.

3.11 ***Psycho*** (1960). In contrast to the knife used in *Babette's Feast*, this prop also can be a murder weapon associated metaphorically with male sexuality.

In addition to their function within a film, props may acquire significance in two other prominent ways. Cultural props, such as a type of car or a piece of furniture, carry meanings associated with their place in a particular society. In the first *Back to the Future* (1985), the cultural and historical significance of different props become key elements in the film when Marty time-travels back to the 1950s where his skateboard, designer underwear, and other objects from the 1980s highlight the comically confusing encounter between two different generations **[Figure 3.12]**.

3.12 ***Back to the Future*** (1985). Props with certain cultural values or from different historical contexts can sometimes function at the heart of a film: here, as markers of the humorous confusion of time travel.

Contextualized props acquire a meaning through their changing place in a narrative. *The Yellow Rolls-Royce* (1964) and *The Red Violin* (1998) focus on the changing meaning of the central prop. In the first film, three different romances are linked through their connection to a beautiful Rolls-Royce. The second film follows the path of a Nicolò Bussotti violin from seventeenth-century Italy to an eighteenth-century Austrian monastery, to nineteenth-century England, to the Chinese Cultural Revolution in the twentieth century, and finally to a contemporary shop in Montreal, Canada [Figure 3.13].

3.13 ***The Red Violin*** (1998). The changing significance of a violin dramatizes how different contexts make meaning of objects.

Some films play with the meaning that a contextual prop comes to acquire. In *Ronin* (1998), a mysterious briefcase unites a group of

mercenaries in a plot about trust and betrayal, but its secret becomes ultimately insignificant. Alfred Hitchcock's famous "McGuffins" are props that are important only at first — like the stolen money in *Psycho* and the uranium in *Notorious* (1946). They move a plot forward but contribute little to the primary drama of love, danger, and desire.

Costumes and Make-Up

Costumes are the clothing and related accessories worn by a character that define the character and contribute to the visual impression and design of the film overall. These can range from common fashions, like a dark suit or dress, to historical or more fantastic costumes. Cosmetics, or make-up, applied to the actor's face or body highlight or even disguise or distort certain aspects of the face or body.

How actors are costumed and made up can play a central part in a film, describing tensions and changes in the character and the story. Sometimes a character becomes fully identified with one basic look or costume. Through his many movie incarnations, James Bond has always appeared in a tuxedo at some point in the action. In *Legally Blonde* (2001), much of the humor revolves around the disjuncture between Elle's bright pink Los Angeles fashions and accessories and the staid environment of Harvard Law School. The dynamic of costuming also can be highlighted in a way that makes the clothes

the center of the movie. *Pygmalion* (1938) and its musical adaptation as *My Fair Lady* (1964) are essentially about a transformation of a girl from the street into an elegant socialite. Along with language and diction, that transformation is indexed by the changes of costume and make-up from dirt and rags to diamonds and gowns **[Figures 3.14a** and **3.14b]**.

(a) (b)

3.14a and 3.14b *My Fair Lady* (1964). Cecil Beaton's costumes and set designs transformed a flower seller into a refined member of society.

Description
The first still shows two well-dressed women engaged in a conversation. The second still shows a young girl being introduced by a middle-aged man to an elderly couple.

Costumes and make-up function in films in four different ways. First, when costumes and make-up support scenic realism, they reproduce, as accurately as possible, the clothing and facial features of people living in a specific time and place. Thus, Napoleon's famous hat and jacket, pallid skin, and lock of hair across his brow are a standard costume and the basic make-up for the many films featuring this character, from Abel Gance's 1927 *Napoléon* to Sacha

Guitry's 1955 *Napoléon*. Increasingly sophisticated **prosthetics** — artificial facial features or body parts used to alter actors' appearances — enhance realism in performance, as with Leonardo DiCaprio as J. Edgar Hoover in *J. Edgar* (2011).

Second, when make-up and costumes function as character highlights, they draw out or point to important parts of a character's personality. Often these highlights are subtle, such as the ascot a pretentious visitor wears. Sometimes they are pronounced, as when villains in silent films wear black hats and twirl their moustaches. In William Wyler's film *Jezebel* (1938), Bette Davis's character shocks southern society when she appears in a red dress. Even though the film is in black and white, her performance and the blocking of her entrance convey the tensions created by the dress's scandalous color. Movies with multiple superheroes like the Marvel Cinematic Universe films depend on recognition of each of the Marvel superheroes by costume and props **[Figure 3.15]**.

3.15 The Marvel Cinematic Universe (2008–present). Across this sprawling franchise of over twenty films adapted from Marvel Comics, iconic costumes distinguish each of the heroes.

Identify the single most important prop in the last film you watched for class. In what ways is it significant? Does the prop function as an instrumental prop, a metaphorical prop, or both? Explain.

Third, when costumes and make-up act as narrative markers, their change or lack of change becomes a crucial way to understand and follow a character and the development of the story. Often a film chronicles the story through the aging of the protagonist: gradually the hair is whitened and the face progressively lined. *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button* (2008) juxtaposes the aging of Cate Blanchett's character with the regression of the protagonist played by Brad Pitt, augmenting the illusions of make-up with computer-generated imagery (CGI). The use of more modern styles of clothing also can advance the story. In *Lee Daniels's The Butler* (2013), the main character played by Forest Whitaker works in the White House for three decades, during eight presidential administrations. Although his job and uniform remain the same through convulsive historical changes, history registers in the changing costumes Oprah Winfrey wears in the role of his wife **[Figures 3.16a** and **3.16b]**. In *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy (2001–2003), the dark corruption of Gollum appears most powerfully in the changes in his

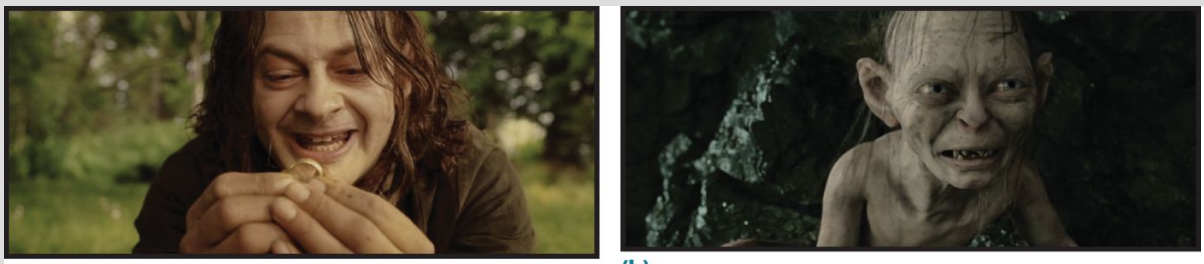
physical appearance, measured in a dramatic flashback to his origins as the hobbit Sméagol at the beginning of *The Return of the King* (2003) **[Figures 3.17a** and **3.17b]**. Make-up, prosthetics, and costuming can also be used as a part of overall production design to signify genre, as they do in the fantasy world of *The Lord of the Rings*.

(a) (b)

3.16a and 3.16b ***Lee Daniels' The Butler*** (2013). Oprah Winfrey wears costumes designed by Ruth Carter to reflect her social status and the historical changes swirling around her character and her husband during his long career as the White House butler.

Description

The first still shows Ophrah Winfrey wearing a floral scarf over her hair. The second still shows a middle-aged woman engaged in a conversation with a man and woman in a living room.



(a) (b)

3.17a and 3.17b ***The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King*** (2003). Viewers waited until the trilogy's last installment for a glimpse of Sméagol (Andy Serkis), the hobbit whose greed

will deform him into the shape of the creature Gollum.

Describe the ways that costuming and make-up add scenic realism, highlight character, or mark the narrative development in the film viewed for class.

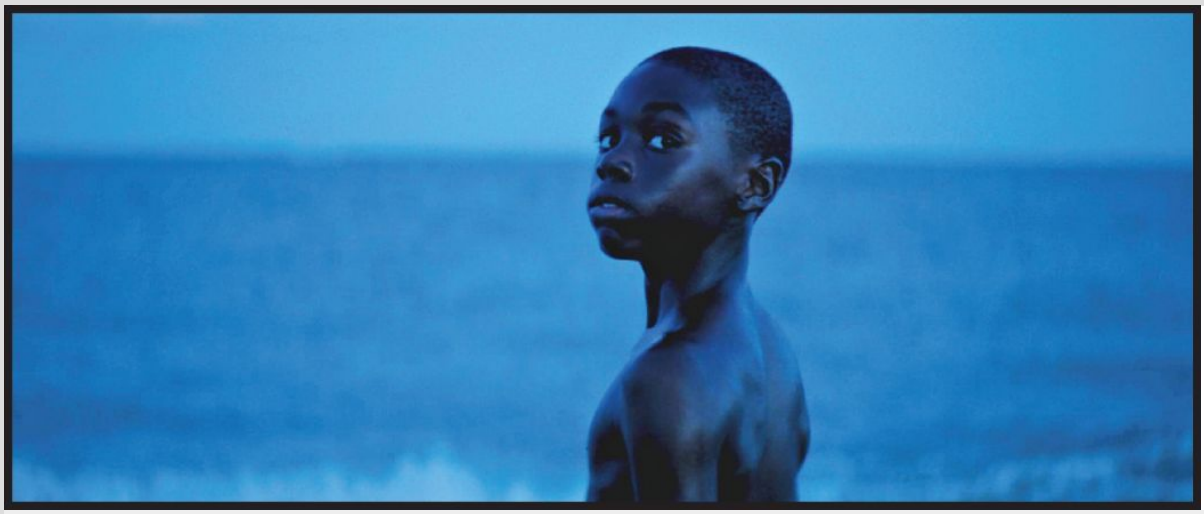
Costumes and make-up that appear natural or realistic in films carry important cultural connotations as well. The desire to define her own gender and sexuality guides the teenager Alike's choice of clothes in *Pariah* (2011); she does not feel like herself in the pink top her mother buys for her. In *The Devil Wears Prada* (2006), the maturation of the naive Andy Sachs (Anne Hathaway) becomes literally apparent in the changes in her outfits, which evolve from college frumpy to designer fashionable.

Lighting

One of the most subtle and important dimensions of mise-en-scène is **lighting** — which not only allows an audience to observe a film's action and understand the setting in which the action takes place but also draws attention to the props, costumes, and actors in the mise-en-scène. Our daily experiences outside the movies demonstrate how lighting can affect our perspective on a person or thing. Entering a dark, shadowed room may evoke feelings of fear, while the same room brightly lit may make us feel welcomed and

comfortable. Lighting is a key element of cinematography, but because lighting choices affect what is visible onscreen and relate profoundly to our experience of mise-en-scène, they are discussed here in this context. Mise-en-scène lighting refers specifically to light sources located within the scene itself. This lighting may be used to shade and accentuate the figures, objects, and spaces of the mise-en-scène. As we discuss in more detail later in this chapter, the primary sources of film lighting are usually not visible onscreen, but they nevertheless affect mise-en-scène.

The interaction of lighting, sets, and actors can create its own drama within the mise-en-scène. How a character moves through light or how the lighting on the character changes can signal important information about the character and story. As the title suggests, *Moonlight* (2016) uses overwhelming darkness and harsh light as the narrative moves through three episodes of the main character Chiron's difficult life, culminating in the glow of soft moonlight that illuminates the character from within and without [**Figure 3.18**]. Meanwhile, in *Citizen Kane*, the regular movement of characters, particularly of Kane, from shadow to light and then back to shadow suggests moral instability.



3.18 ***Moonlight*** (2016). This film uses contrasting lighting to show a young black man's coming of age. He eventually discovers his identity in the calm light of a new self.

The mise-en-scène can use both natural and directional lighting. **Natural lighting** usually assumes an incidental role in a scene; it derives from a natural source in a scene or setting, such as the illumination from the sun, the moon, or a fire. Spread across a set before more specific lighting emphases are added, **set lighting** distributes an evenly diffused illumination throughout a scene as a kind of lighting base. **Directional lighting** is lighting coming from a single direction. It may create the impression of a natural light source but actually directs light in ways that define and shape the object or person being illuminated. As illustrated in the shots presented on page 98 from *Sweet Smell of Success* (1957) **[Figures 3.19–3.25]**, an even more specific technical grammar has developed to designate the various strategies used in lighting the mise-en-scène:

- **Three-point lighting** is a common lighting technique that uses three sources: key lighting (to illuminate the object), backlighting (to pick out the object from the background), and fill lighting (to minimize shadows) **[Figure 3.19]**.
- **Key light** is the main source of non-natural lighting in a scene. It may be balanced with little contrast between light and dark in the case of **high-key lighting** or the contrasts between light and dark may be stark, as in **low-key lighting**. These terms indicate the ratio of key to fill lighting: high-key lighting is even (low ratio of key to fill) and used for melodramas and realist films; low-key lighting is dramatic (high ratio of key to fill) and used in horror films and film noir **[Figures 3.20** and **3.21]**.
- **Fill lighting** is a technique that uses secondary fill lights to balance the key lighting by removing shadows or to emphasize other spaces and objects in the scene **[Figure 3.22]**.
- **Highlighting** describes the use of the different lighting sources to emphasize certain characters or objects **[Figure 3.23]**.
- **Backlighting** is a highlighting technique that illuminates the person or object from behind, tending to silhouette the subject **[Figure 3.24]**.
- **Frontal lighting**, **sidelighting**, **underlighting**, and **top lighting** are used to illuminate the subject from different directions in order to draw out features or create specific atmospheres around the subject **[Figure 3.25]**.

3.19 ***Sweet Smell of Success*** (1957). Cinematographer James Wong Howe's celebrated scathing tale of the newspaper business uses Hollywood's classic three-point lighting schema as a basic setup.

3.20 ***Sweet Smell of Success*** (1957). High-key lighting emphasizes the daytime glare of a crowded coffee shop.

3.21 ***Sweet Smell of Success*** (1957). Low-key lighting heightens the contrast between light and shadow in a dangerous encounter.

3.22 ***Sweet Smell of Success*** (1957). Fill lighting picks out press agent Sidney Falco (Tony Curtis) as he listens to J. J. Hunsucker (Burt Lancaster) twist the facts.

3.23 ***Sweet Smell of Success*** (1957). Highlighting picks out the powerful columnist from the background.

3.24 ***Sweet Smell of Success*** (1957). Backlighting foregrounds the illicit nature of an encounter.

3.25 ***Sweet Smell of Success*** (1957). Underlighting distorts a policeman's smile into a threat.

The mise-en-scène can use both **hard lighting** (a high-contrast lighting style that creates hard edges, distinctive shadows, and a harsh effect, especially when filming people) and **soft lighting** (diffused, low-contrast lighting that reduces or eliminates hard edges and shadows and can be more flattering when filming people). These lighting techniques, in conjunction with the narrative and other features of the mise-en-scène, elicit certain responses. Shading — the use of shadows to shape or draw attention to certain features — can explain or comment on an object or a person in a way the narrative does not. Hard and soft lighting and shading can create a variety of complex effects through highlighting and the play

of light and shadow that enlighten viewers in more than one sense of the word.

In a movie like *Barry Lyndon* (1975), the story is conspicuously inseparable from the lighting techniques that illuminate it. Extraordinarily low and soft lighting, with sharp frontal light and little fill light on the faces, creates an artificial intensity in the expressions of the characters, whose social desperation hides their ethical emptiness **[Figure 3.26]**. One particular version of this play of light is referred to as **chiaroscuro lighting**, a dramatic, high-contrast lighting that emphasizes shadows and the contrast between light and dark. This pictorial arrangement of light and dark creates depth and contrast. In the opening scene of *The Godfather* (1972), the chiaroscuro lighting in Don Corleone's den contrasts with the brightly lit wedding party outdoors.

3.26 ***Barry Lyndon*** (1975). In this example of chiaroscuro lighting, the soft glow of the candles creates areas of brightness (*chiaro*) as the background is engulfed in darkness (*scuro*). The murky color scheme contributes to the eerie atmosphere and the characters' ghostlike appearance.

VIEWING CUE

LaunchPad

Go to **launchpadworks.com** to watch a clip from Richard Linklater's *Boyhood* (2014). Consider the role of lighting in this sequence. Does it use low-key lighting or high-key lighting? Does the lighting dramatically add to the sequence's emotional impact? Or if you consider the lighting unremarkable, how would you argue that it is still significant?

None of the elements of mise-en-scène — from props to costumes to lighting — can be assigned standard meanings because they are always subject to different uses in each film. They also carry different historical and cultural connotations at different times. Although the low-key lighting of German expressionist cinema, as in the 1924 horror film *Waxworks*, may be formally similar to that found in 1950s film noir, such as in *Kiss Me Deadly* (1955), the lighting has a very different significance, reflecting the distinctive perspective of each film and the cultural context that produced it. The metaphoric darkness that surrounds characters like Dracula and Jack the Ripper in the first film suggests a monstrous evil with psychological effects; in the second, that shadowy atmosphere describes a corruption that is entirely human, a function of brutal greed and sexualized violence. The contemporary independent film *Pi* (1998) uses high-contrast lighting and black-and-white film stock

to evoke associations with these earlier film movements and connote both the psychological disturbance of the math-obsessed protagonist and the ruthless motives of those who seek to profit from his predictions.

Performance: Actors and Stars

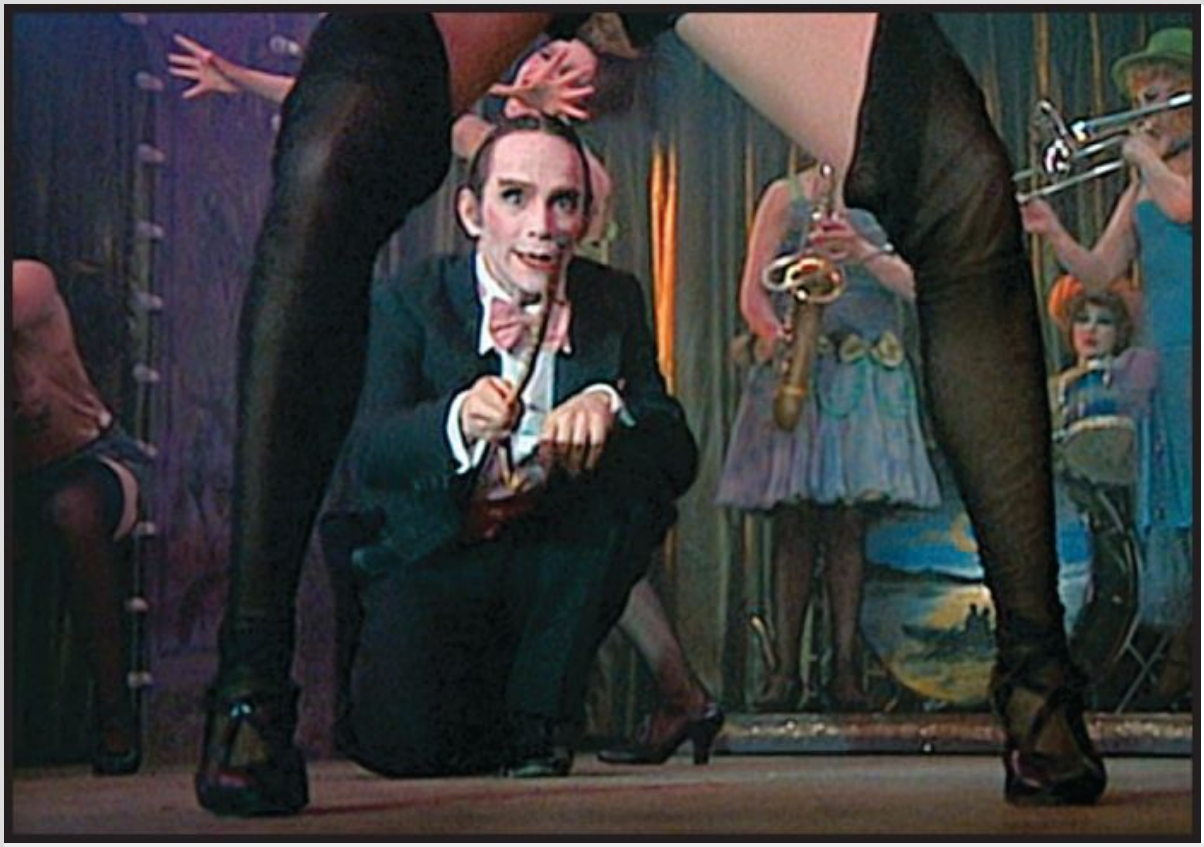
At the center of the mise-en-scène is most often a flesh-and-blood **actor** who embodies and performs a film character through gestures and movements. A more intangible yet essential part of mise-en-scène, **performance** describes the actor's use of language, physical expression, and gesture to bring a character to life and to communicate important dimensions of that character to the audience. Because characters help us see and understand the actions and world of a film and because performance is an interpretation of that character by an actor, the success or failure of many films depends on an actor's performance. In a film like *Kind Hearts and Coronets* (1949), in which Alec Guinness plays eight different roles, the shifting performances of the actor may be its greatest achievement.

In a performance, we can distinguish two primary elements — voice, which includes the natural sound of an actor's voice along with the various intonations or accents he or she may create for a particular role, and bodily movement, which includes physical gestures and facial expressions and, especially important to the movies, eye

movements and eye contact. (As in many elements of mise-en-scène, these features of performance also rely on other dimensions of film form, such as sound and camera positions.) Woody Allen has made a career of developing characters through the performance of a strident, panicky voice and bodily and eye movements that dart in uncoordinated directions. At the heart of such movies as *The Blue Angel* (1930) and *Shanghai Express* (1932) is Marlene Dietrich's sultry voice, complemented by drooping eyes and languid body poses and gestures **[Figure 3.30]**.

3.30 ***The Blue Angel*** (1930). The voice, body, and eyes of Marlene Dietrich become the signature vehicles for her dramatic performances as an actor and character in her breakthrough role.

Additionally, different acting styles define performances. With stylized acting, an actor employs emphatic and highly self-conscious gestures or speaks in pronounced tones with elevated diction. The actor seems fully aware that he or she is acting and addressing an audience. Much less evident today, these stylized performances can be seen in the work of Lillian Gish in *Broken Blossoms* (1919), in Joel Grey's role as the master of ceremonies in *Cabaret* (1972) **[Figure 3.31]**, and in the comic performances seen in virtually any Monty Python movie.



3.31 ***Cabaret*** (1972). Joel Grey is the master of ceremonies whose own stylized performance introduces a film replete with stylized performances on and off the stage.

More influential since the 1940s, naturalistic acting requires an actor to embody the role that he or she is playing fully and naturally in order to communicate that character's essential self, famously demonstrated by Marlon Brando as Stanley in *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1951), a role in which the actor and character seem almost indistinguishable **[Figure 3.32]**.

3.32 ***A Streetcar Named Desire*** (1951). Ever since this landmark adaptation, Marlon Brando's physical performance of Stanley has become difficult to distinguish from the essence of that fictional character.

Types of Actors

As part of the usual distribution of actors through mise-en-scène, **leading actors** — the two or three actors, often stars, who represent the central characters in a narrative — play the central characters. Recognizable actors who are associated with particular character types, often humorous or sinister, and often are cast in minor parts are sometimes referred to as **character actors**. They might play the role of the bumbling cook in a western. **Supporting actors** play secondary characters in a film, serving as foils or companions to the central characters. Supporting actors and character actors often add to the complexity of a film's plotline or emotional impact. They may involve us more thoroughly in the action or highlight a movie's themes. In the hands of a strong actor, such as James Earl Jones in a supporting role in *Field of Dreams* (1989) or Jennifer Lawrence in *American Hustle* (2014), these supporting roles frequently balance our perspective on the main characters, perhaps requiring us to rethink and reassess the main character's decisions and motivations. In *Field of Dreams*, the writer that Jones plays, Terence Mann, fulfills his fantasy of entering the field and joining the baseball game, while lead actor Kevin Costner's character must remain behind. Finally, realism and spectacle are enhanced by **extras** — actors without speaking parts who appear in the background and in crowd scenes. Those relatively large groups of "background artists" provide character and sometimes personality to large crowd scenes.

Actors frequently are selected for parts precisely because of their association with certain **character types** — conventional characters typically portrayed by actors cast because of their physical features, their acting style, or the history of other roles they have played. Tom Hanks portrays "everyman" characters, while Helen Mirren played both Elizabeth I and Elizabeth II in the same year. To appreciate and understand a character can consequently mean recognizing this intersection of a type and an actor's interpretation or transformation of it. Arnold Schwarzenegger's large and muscular physical stature, clipped voice, and stiff acting style suit well the characters he plays in *The Terminator* (1984) and *Total Recall* (1990). The comedy of *Kindergarten Cop* (1990) arises from his tough character's attempt to act "against type" in his undercover role of a kindergarten teacher.

FILM IN FOCUS Mise-en-Scène in *Do the Right Thing* (1989)

See also: *Crooklyn* (1994); *Summer of Sam* (1999); *25th Hour* (2002)

FILM IN FOCUS
LaunchPad

To watch a clip from *Do the Right Thing* (1989), go to LaunchPad for *The Film Experience* at **launchpadworks.com**

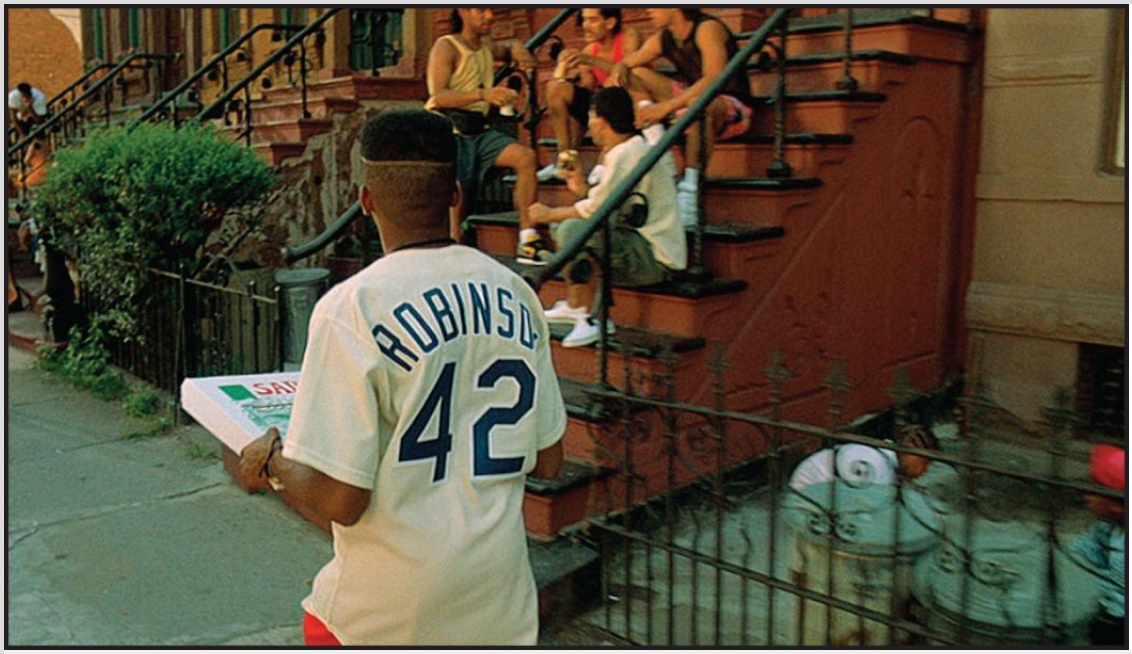
In Spike Lee's *Do the Right Thing* (1989), characters wander through Bedford-Stuyvesant, a gentrifying African American neighborhood in Brooklyn. Here, life

becomes a complicated negotiation between a private mise-en-scène (apartments, bedrooms, and businesses) and a public mise-en-scène (city streets and sidewalks crowded with people). With Lee in the role of Mookie, who acts as a thread connecting the various characters, stores, and street corners, the film explores the different attitudes, personalities, and desires that clash within a single urban place by featuring a variety of stages — rooms, stores, and restaurants — with personal and racial associations. On the hot summer day of this setting, lighting creates an intense and tactile heat, and this sensation of heat makes the mise-en-scène vibrate with energy and frustration. Working with his usual production designer, Wynn Thomas, and cinematographer, Ernest R. Dickerson, Lee transforms the neighborhood into a theatrical space for fraught encounters.

Lee's performance in the central role of Mookie draws on his then-emerging status as a star actor and a star filmmaker. In fact, this double status as star and director indicates clearly that what happens in the mise-en-scène is about him. Physically unimposing, restrained, and cautious throughout the film, Lee's performance seems to shift and adjust depending on the character he is responding to. As the central performer in a neighborhood of performers, Lee's Mookie is a chameleon, surviving by continually changing his persona to fit the social scene he is in. By the end of the film, however, Mookie must decide which performance will be the real self he brings to the mise-en-scène — how, that is, he will "act" in a time of crisis by taking responsibility for the role he is acting.

The costumes (by Ruth Carter) and make-up (by Matiki Anoff) in *Do the Right Thing* reflect the styles of dress in U.S. cities in the 1980s. Both contribute to a kind of scenic realism of the time, yet Lee also uses them to define and highlight each character's place in the film's narrative. Mookie's Brooklyn Dodgers shirt with the name and number of the legendary baseball player Jackie Robinson on the back symbolizes his hometown and African American pride **[Figure 3.27]**, whereas Pino (John Turturro) wears white, sleeveless T-shirts that signify his white working-class background. Jade (Joie Lee), Mookie's sister, stands out in her dramatic hats, skirts, and earrings and elegant make-up and hairstyles, calling attention perhaps

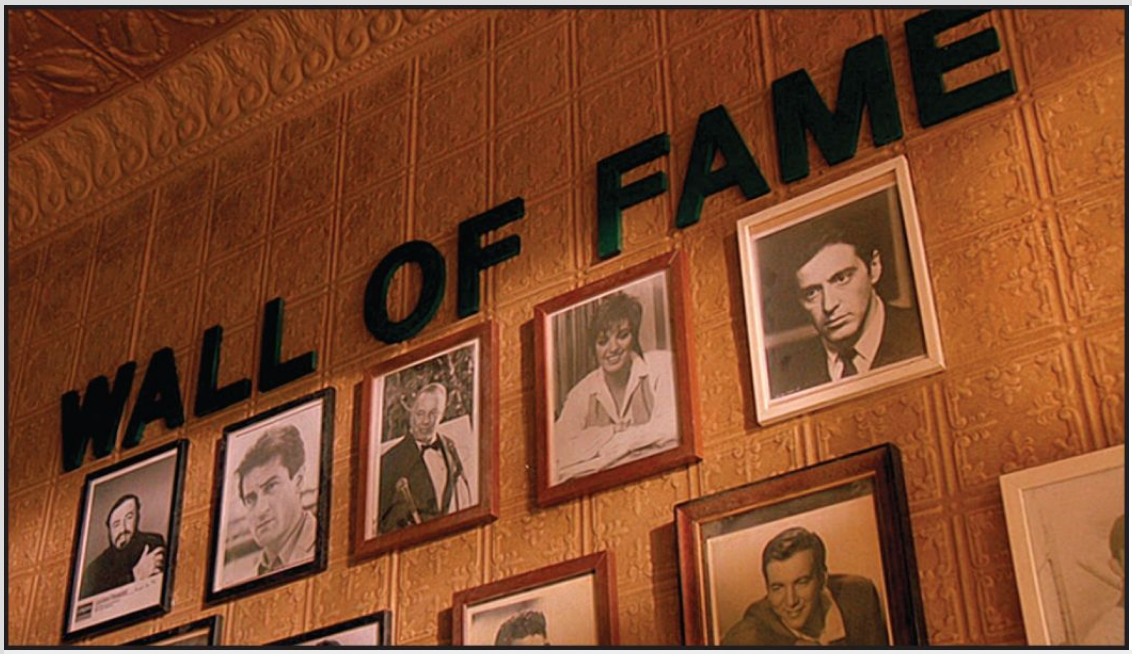
to the individuality and creativity that allow her, uniquely here, to casually cross racial lines.



3.27 ***Do the Right Thing*** (1989). Mookie wears a Brooklyn Dodgers shirt with Jackie Robinson's number as a symbol of hometown and African American pride.

The central crisis of *Do the Right Thing* turns on the drama of instrumental props that become loaded with cultural meanings and metaphorical powers. Early in the film, Smiley (Roger Guenveur Smith) holds up a photograph of Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X as a call to fight against racism with both nonviolence and violence. Shortly thereafter, Da Mayor (Ossie Davis) nearly instigates a fight because Sonny, the Korean grocer (Steve Park), has not stocked a can of his favorite beer, Miller High Life. But the walls of Sal's pizzeria contain photographs of famous Italian Americans — Frank Sinatra, Joe DiMaggio, Liza Minnelli, Al Pacino, and others **[Figure 3.28]** — and they are what ignites the film. When Buggin' Out (Giancarlo Esposito) complains that there should be photos of African Americans on that wall because Sal's clientele is all black, Sal (Danny Aiello) angrily responds that he can decorate the walls of his pizzeria however he wishes. Later, when Radio Raheem (Bill Nunn) refuses to turn down his boom box (an object that has become synonymous with who he is), he and Buggin' Out again confront Sal with

the cultural significance of the photos and the neighborhood residents' social rights within this mise-en-scène: why, they demand, are there no photographs of African Americans on the wall? Finally, at the climactic moment in the film, Mookie tosses a garbage can through the window of the pizzeria, sparking the store's destruction but saving the lives of Sal and his son.



3.28 ***Do the Right Thing*** (1989). Nostalgic black-and-white photos of Italian Americans on the pizzeria wall illustrate the potential of props to serve as political flashpoints.

Both social and graphic blockings become dramatic calculators in a film explicitly about the "block" and the arrangement of people in this neighborhood. In one scene, Pino, Vito (Richard Edson), and Mookie stand tensely apart in a corner of the pizzeria as Mookie calls on Vito to denounce his brother's behavior and Pino counters with a call for family ties. Their bodies are quietly hostile and territorial simply in their arrangement and in their movements around the counter that separates them. This orchestration of bodies climaxes in the final showdown at Sal's pizzeria. When Buggin' Out and Radio Raheem enter the pizzeria, the screaming begins with Sal behind the counter, while Mookie, Pino, Vito, and the neighborhood kids shout from different places in the room. As the fight begins, the bodies collapse on each other and spill onto the street in a mass of

undistinguishable faces. After the police arrive and Radio Raheem is killed, the placement of his body creates a sharp line between Mookie, Sal, and his sons on one side and the growing crowd of furious blacks and Latinos on the other. Within this blocking, Mookie suddenly moves from one side of the line to the other and then calmly retrieves the garbage can to throw through the window. The riot that follows is a direct consequence of Mookie's decisions about where to position himself and how to shatter the blocked mise-en-scène that divides Sal's space from the mob.

Do the Right Thing employs an array of lighting techniques that at first may seem naturalistic, but over the course of the film, directional lighting becomes particularly dramatic. From the beginning, the film juxtaposes the harsh, full glare of the streets with the soft morning light that highlights the interior spaces of DJ Mister Señor Love Daddy's (Samuel L. Jackson) radio station, where he announces a heat wave for the coming day, and the bedroom where Da Mayor awakens with Mother Sister (Ruby Dee). Here the lighting of the interior mise-en-scène emphasizes the rich and blending shades of the dark skin of the African American characters, while the bright, hard lighting of the exterior spaces draws out distinctions in the skin colors of blacks, whites, and Asians. This high-key lighting of exteriors, in turn, accentuates the colors of the objects and props in the mise-en-scène as a way of sharply isolating them in the scene — for example, the blues of the police uniforms and cars, the yellows of the fruits in the Korean market, and the reds of the steps and walls of the neighborhood **[Figure 3.29]**.

3.29 ***Do the Right Thing*** (1989). The high-key lighting against a glaringly red wall adds to the intensity and theatricality of these otherwise casual commentators on the street.

Other uses of lighting in the film are more dramatic and complex. For example, the dramatic backlighting of Mookie as he climbs the stairs to deliver the pizza adds an almost religious and certainly heroic/romantic effect to the pizza delivery. When Pino confronts Vito in the storage room, the scene is highlighted by an overhead light that swings back and forth, creating a rocking and turbulent visual effect. In the final scene, Mookie walks home to his son on a street sharply divided between bright, glaring light on one side and dark shadows on the other.

More charged with the politics of mise-en-scène than many films, *Do the Right Thing* turns a relatively small city space into an electrified set where actors, costumes, props, blocking, and lighting create a remarkably dense, jagged, and mobile environment. Here the elements of mise-en-scène are always theatrically and politically in play, always about the spatial construction of culture in a specific time and place. To live here, people need to assume, as Mookie eventually does, the powers and responsibilities of knowing how and when to act.

Stars

The leading actors in many films are movie stars — individuals who, because of their cultural celebrity, bring a powerful aura to their performance, making them the focal points in the mise-en-scène. Unlike less famous actors, star performers often dominate the action and space of the mise-en-scène, bring the accumulated history and significance of their past performances to each new film appearance, and acquire a status that transforms their individual physical presence into more abstract or mythical qualities **[Figure 3.33]**. Stars thus combine the ordinary (they embody and play types audience members can identify with) and the extraordinary, bringing their distinct personality to their roles. Early in Hollywood history, the star-driven system often identified an actor with a particular genre that had a distinctive mise-en-scène. Douglas Fairbanks, for example, starred in swashbuckling adventure tales, and Charlie Chaplin's comic "Little Tramp" character was instantly recognizable by his costume.

3.33 ***The Post*** (2017). In this film about how the *Washington Post* exposed a massive government cover-up, stars Meryl Streep and Tom Hanks add a larger-than-life dimension to a historical re-creation of the 1971 investigation.

A star's performance focuses the action of the mise-en-scène and draws attention to important events and themes in the film. In *Casablanca* (1942), several individual dramas about different characters trying to escape Casablanca are presented, but Humphrey Bogart's character Rick Blaine is, in an important sense, the only story. The other characters become important only as they become part of his life. In *Money Monster* (2016), George Clooney plays a wacky, histrionic financial adviser on an absurdly theatrical television show about investing. The show's producer is played by Julia Roberts, and the interactions between the two star performers overshadow the hostage crisis at the center of the film's plot. Johnny Depp's tongue-in-cheek performance as Jack Sparrow in *Pirates of the*

Caribbean: The Curse of the Black Pearl (2003) contributed to the film's unexpected success and generated sequels highlighting the character's antics.

In all three of these films, much of the power of the characters is a consequence of the star status of the actors, recognized and understood in relation to their roles in other films — and in some cases, in relation to a life off the screen. Recognizing and identifying with Rick in *Casablanca* implies, especially for viewers in 1942, a recognition on some level that Rick is more than Rick, that this star character in *Casablanca* is an extension of characters Bogart has portrayed in such films as *High Sierra* (1941) and *The Maltese Falcon* (1941). A similar measuring takes place as we watch Clooney and Roberts. Clooney's performance in *Money Monster* impresses viewers because the character he plays is so unlike the characters he plays in more serious roles in *Syriana* (2005) and *The Descendants* (2011). Part of our appreciation and understanding of his role is the skill and range he embodies as a star. Depp's pirate captain builds on the actor's association with eccentric characters and on cultural recognition of the rock star persona of Keith Richards of the Rolling Stones. We understand these characters as an extension of or departure from other characters associated with the star.

Blocking

The arrangement and movement of actors in relation to one another within the physical space of a mise-en-scène is called **blocking**. Social blocking describes the arrangement of characters to accentuate relations among them. In *The Imitation Game* (2014), while working to break the German Enigma code, Alan Turing and his team gather together in scenes blocked to draw attention to the tension within the group **[Figure 3.34]**.

3.34 ***The Imitation Game*** (2014). In this example of social blocking, several mathematicians remain tensely at odds within the framework of a necessary cooperation.

Graphic blocking arranges characters or groups according to visual patterns to portray spatial harmony, tension, or some other visual atmosphere. Fritz Lang, for instance, is renowned for his blocking of crowd scenes. In *Metropolis* (1927), the oppression of individuality is embodied in the mechanical movements of rectangles of marching workers. In *Fury* (1936), a mob lynching in a small town is staged as graphic-blocked patterns whose directional arrow suggests

a kind of dark fate moving against the lone individual. Both forms of blocking can become especially dynamic and creative in dance or fight sequences. In *Kill Bill: Vol. 2* (2004), the choreographed movement of bodies visually describes social relations and tensions as well as graphic patterns suggesting freedom or control.

TECHNOLOGY IN ACTION

Scenic Lighting

Lighting, like all elements of mise-en-scène, becomes integrated into the various strategies of cinematography, editing, and sound. The technologies of lighting determine key possibilities and directions in the development of a cinematic mise-en-scène.

In the early years of film history, movies relied on sunlight made available through on-location filming and from buildings with open, retractable glass. In the first decade of the twentieth century, mercury-vapor lamps and large Cooper-Hewitt lights began to allow for interior shooting. Thomas Edison's famous Black Maria studio featured a glass roof on a rotating structure that allowed it to follow the sun, and one of the main reasons for the film industry's move to California was the sunny climate. Not surprisingly, because of the limitations in lighting, a majority of early films focused on exterior action or theatrical interiors.

Improvements in artificial lighting technology eventually encouraged more experiments with lighting as a source of meaning. In films such as D. W. Griffith's *Enoch Arden* (1911), soft direct lighting illuminates the faces of characters, often meant to glamorize actors in a way that reinforced the emerging star system. By the 1920s, expressionistic lighting explored the creative possibilities of artificial lighting with often dramatically contrasting light-and-shadow effects, portraying psychological and social worlds filled with shadows and conflicts **[Figure 3.35a]**.

3.35a ***The Third Man*** (1949). The heritage of sharp, contrastive lighting extends from German Expressionism to postwar film noir.

Since the 1930s, classical highlighting delineates and complicates characters within the three-point lighting system provided by arc lamps and incandescent lights. While this system appears less obvious with the introduction of color film stock, three-point lighting allows for a spectrum of sharp and soft illuminations and therefore remains a critical compositional tactic for creating the nuanced and complex characters so central to classical narratives **[Figure 3.35b]**.

3.35b ***An American in Paris*** (1951). Even with the rise of Technicolor films, classical lighting became a key vehicle for character development.

Following World War II, naturalistic lighting reappeared in the different new waves from the 1950s to 1970s. Rather than a technological necessity like the naturalistic lighting of early cinema, the lighting of such postwar films, from *Rome: Open City* (1945) to *Taxi Driver* (1976), became a thematic centerpiece to the story. Unlike classical lighting, these techniques frequently foreground the exterior world rather than the primary characters in order to describe a new social order in which the characters struggle to find their place.

Since the 2000s, digital lighting has provided an open palette for filmmakers, far less dependent on physical equipment or external conditions. Although there is some loss of lighting texture in the products of this new technology, it also offers more freedom to color the world in fantastic lights and primary hues. The tendency toward comic-book adaptations has, in part, followed this technology.

Since it lowers the lighting requirements for filmmakers, this technology also has become a factor in the proliferation of contemporary documentary films [**Figure 3.35c**].

3.35c *Life of Pi* (2012). Ang Lee's film uses digital lighting to paint a world of dynamic colors that fluctuate between realism and fantasy.

Space and Design

The overall look of a film is coordinated by its design team, which uses space and composition to create a scene for the film's action. The set design of *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968) is characterized by futuristic design elements arranged sparsely within the elongated widescreen frame. The crowded warrens of *Fantastic Mr. Fox* (2009) fill the frame but give the viewer little sense of depth, with stop-

motion figures and props jumbled together **[Figure 3.36]**. The frontal orientation of *Marie Antoinette* (2006) emphasizes the screens, drapes, and wallpaper of Versailles, giving the film a compositional style reminiscent of decorative arts. Even as most designers would say their work is in the service of the story, the actors who move through these spaces are picked out by lighting, carefully made up, and costumed in palettes that integrate the work of all these departments into the mise-en-scène.

3.36 ***Fantastic Mr. Fox*** (2009). Even an animated mise-en-scène can create complex spatial designs, here emphasizing a two-dimensional world with crowded activities and lateral movements.

Thinking about Mise-en-Scène

The elements of mise-en-scène that we have designated are used together to create the world of the film. Mise-en-scène describes everything visible within the frame. Properties of cinematography that are discussed in the next chapter (including framing, angle, and color) render the mise-en-scène in a particular way, but a visual impression starts with what is in front of the camera or later placed in the frame with special effects technology.

How do audiences interpret mise-en-scène within the longer traditions of this composition? Whether a film presents authentic places or ingeniously fabricates new worlds, its sets, props, acting styles, blocking, and lighting create opportunities for audiences to find significance. From the miniaturized reenactment of Admiral Dewey's naval victory in one of the first "newsreels," *The Battle of Manila Bay* (1898), to the futuristic ductwork located "somewhere on the Los Angeles–Belfast border" of *Brazil* (1985), to the winter light of the Swedish countryside in *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* (2011) and the vast and crowded World War II beaches of *Dunkirk* (2017), mise-en-scène can produce specific meanings through views of real lands and landscapes as well as imaginatively designed settings **[Figure 3.37]**. In this section, we explore how different approaches to and cultural contexts for mise-en-scène help us identify

prominent concepts and larger assumptions within the history of mise-en-scène.

3.37 *Dunkirk* (2017). The mise-en-scène in this film about a famous World War II evacuation re-creates the seaside beaches full of desperate Allied soldiers.

Mise-en-Scène as an External Condition or a Measure of Character

For most movie viewers, recognizing the places, objects, and arrangements of sets and settings has never been simply a formal exercise. The mise-en-scène has always been the site where viewers measure human, aesthetic, and social values; recognize significant cinematic traditions; and in those interactions, identify and assign meaning to the changing places of films.

The most fundamental value of mise-en-scène is that it defines where we are: the physical settings and objects that surround us indicate our place in the material world. Some people crave large cities with bright lights and active crowds; others find it important that their town have a church as the visible center of the community. Much the same holds true for cinematic mise-en-scène, in which the place created by the elements of the mise-en-scène becomes the essential condition for the meaning of the characters' actions. As part of this larger cultural context, cinematic mise-en-scène helps to describe the limits of human experience by indicating the external boundaries and contexts in which film characters exist (corresponding to our own natural, social, or imaginary worlds). On the other hand, how mise-en-scène is changed or manipulated in a film can reflect the powers of film characters and groups — and their ability to control or arrange their world in a meaningful way. Although the first set of values (conditions and limits) can be established without characters, the second (changing or manipulating those limits) requires the interaction of characters and mise-en-scène.

As an External Condition

Mise-en-scène as an external condition indicates surfaces, objects, and exteriors that define the material possibilities in a place or space. The mise-en-scène may be a magical space full of active objects, or it may be a barren landscape with no borders. In *King*

Solomon's Mines (1937) and *The African Queen* (1951), arid desert plains and dense jungle foliage threaten the colonial visitors, whereas films like *The Lady Vanishes* (1938) and *The Taking of Pelham 123* (2009), set in the interiors of trains and subways, feature long, narrow passageways, multiple windows, and strange, anonymous faces. An individual's movements are restricted as the world flies by outside. In each case, the mise-en-scène describes the material limits of a film's physical world. From those terms, the rest of the scene or even the entire film must develop.

As a Measure of Character

Mise-en-scène as a measure of character dramatizes how an individual or a group establishes an identity through interaction with (or control of) the surrounding setting and sets. In *The Adventures of Robin Hood* (1938), the mise-en-scène of a forest becomes a sympathetic and intimate place where the outlaw-hero can achieve justice and find camaraderie. In *Brokeback Mountain* (2005), the wide-open space of the mountain expands the horizons of the characters' sexual identities **[Figure 3.38]**. In the science fiction film *Donovan's Brain* (1953), the vision and the personality of a mad scientist are projected and reflected in a laboratory with twisted, mechanized gadgets and wires. Essentially, his ability to create new life forms from that environment reflects both his genius and his insane ambitions. The interactions between character and

elements of the mise-en-scène may convey more meaning to viewers than even the interactions between the characters.

3.38 ***Brokeback Mountain*** (2005). In the expansive mountains and plains of the American West, two cowboys explore new sexual intimacies as the film confounds expectations associated with setting.

Keep in mind that our own cultural expectations about the material world determine how we understand the values of a film's mise-en-scène. To modern viewers, the mise-en-scène of *The Gold Rush* (1925) might appear crude and stagy, and the make-up and costumes might seem more like circus outfits than realistic clothing. For viewers in the 1920s, however, the fantastical and theatrical quality of this mise-en-scène made it entertaining. For them, watching the Little Tramp perform his balletic magic in a strange location was more important than the realism of the mise-en-scène.

Primary Traditions for Mise-en-Scène

Two prominent contexts for eliciting interpretations, or readings, of films include naturalistic mise-en-scène and theatrical mise-en-scène. Naturalistic mise-en-scène appears realistic and recognizable to viewers. Theatrical mise-en-scène denaturalizes the locations and other elements of the mise-en-scène so that its features appear unfamiliar, exaggerated, or artificial. Throughout their history, movies have tended to emphasize one or the other of these contexts, although many films have moved smoothly between the two. From *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) to *Bridge of Spies* (2015), settings, costumes, and props have been selected or constructed to appear as authentic as possible in an effort to convince viewers that the filmmakers had a clear window on a true historical place. The first movie re-creates the historical sites and events of the Civil War, even titling some of its shots "historical facsimiles," whereas the second reconstructs a variety of Cold War–era settings in the United States, Russia, and Germany. In other films, from *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1920) to the *Harry Potter* series (2001–2011), those same elements of mise-en-scène have exaggerated or transformed reality as most people know it. *Caligari* uses sets painted with twisted buildings and nightmarish backgrounds, and the fantastical settings of the *Harry Potter* films are inhabited by magical animals and animated objects.

The Naturalistic Tradition

Naturalism is one of the most effective — and most misleading — ways to approach mise-en-scène. If mise-en-scène is about the arrangement of space and the objects in it, as we have suggested, then naturalism in the mise-en-scène means that a place looks the way it is supposed to look. We can, in fact, pinpoint several more precise characteristics of a naturalistic mise-en-scène. Elements of the mise-en-scène follow assumed laws of nature and society and have a consistently logical relation to each other, and the mise-en-scène and characters mutually define one another.

Naturalistic mise-en-scène is consistent with accepted scientific laws and cultural customs. Thus, in a naturalistic setting, a person would be unable to hear whispers from far across a field, and a restaurant might have thirty tables and several waiters or waitresses. This kind of realistic mise-en-scène also creates logical or homogeneous connections among different sets, props, and characters. Costumes, props, and lighting are appropriate and logical extensions of the naturalistic setting, and sets relate to each other as part of a consistent geography. *The Battle of Algiers* (1966) uses location shooting in an attempt to re-create with documentary realism the revolution that was fought in the city's streets a decade earlier. Naturalism in the movies also means that the mise-en-scène and the characters mutually define or reflect each other. The gritty streets and dark rooms of a city reflect the bleak attitudes of thieves and femmes fatales in *The Killers* (1946). In *Crazy Rich Asians* (2018), the wealthy world of contemporary Singapore becomes the

background for the romance between a New York University professor and her rich boyfriend. Here the naturalistic background of upper-class Singapore, with its luxurious spaces and fashionable outfits, clashes with the expectations and experiences of everyday New York City [Figure 3.39].

3.39 ***Crazy Rich Asians*** (2018). Two naturalistic social worlds and assumptions about them conflict in this romance between a middle-class New Yorker and the heir to a wealthy Singaporean family.

Two specific traditions have emerged from naturalistic mise-en-scène. First, *historical mise-en-scène* re-creates a recognizable historical scene, highlighting those elements that call attention to a specific location and time in history. *All Quiet on the Western Front* (1930) can still stun audiences with its brutally accurate representation of trench warfare in World War I, and the setting and costumes of *The Last Emperor* (1987) capture the clash of tradition with Chinese Communist society.

Another variation on the naturalistic tradition, *everyday mise-en-scène* calls attention to the ordinary rather than the historical and constructs commonplace backdrops for the characters and the action. In *Louisiana Story* (1948), a swamp and its rich natural life are the always-visible arena for the daily routines of a young boy in the Louisiana bayous. In *Winter's Bone* (2010), the struggles of the heroine to protect her family home are set against the stark beauty and sparse settlement of the Ozarks. In the Brazilian film *Central Station* (1998), a railroad station in Rio de Janeiro and a poor rural area in the Brazilian countryside are the understated stages in a touching tale of a woman's friendship with a boy in search of his father.

The Theatrical Tradition

In contrast, theatrical mise-en-scène creates fantastical environments that display and even exult in their artificial and constructed nature. In films in this tradition, elements of the mise-en-scène violate or bend the laws of nature and society, dramatic inconsistencies occur within or across settings, or the mise-en-scène takes on an independent life that requires confrontations between its elements and the characters.

Often violating the accepted laws of how the world functions, theatrical mise-en-scène can call attention to the arbitrary or constructed nature of that world. In movies from *Top Hat* (1935) to

Silk Stockings (1957), Fred Astaire somehow finds a way to dance on walls and ceilings and transform spoons and brooms into magical partners. In Jim Jarmusch's *The Dead Don't Die* (2019), a zombie invasion of a small town quickly evolves into a movie-within-a-movie where the town begins to resemble a parodic film set for George Romero's classic horror movies, such as *Night of the Living Dead* (1968) **[Figure 3.40]**. Dramatic inconsistencies within a film's mise-en-scène indicate the instability of those scenes, costumes, and props — and the world they define. In a theatrical mise-en-scène, props, sets, and even bodies assume an independent (and sometimes contradictory) life that provokes regular confrontations or negotiations between the mise-en-scène and the characters. Two historical trends — expressive and constructive — are associated with theatrical mise-en-scène.

3.40 *The Dead Don't Die* (2019). Although zombie films necessarily violate most naturalistic rules and expectations, here the characters inhabit the theatrical formulas of a self-conscious horror-film set.

A specific version of the theatrical tradition is *expressive mise-en-scène*. In this type of mise-en-scène, the settings, sets, props, and other dimensions of the mise-en-scène assert themselves independently of the characters and describe an emotional or spiritual life permeating the material world. Associated most commonly with the German expressionist films of the 1920s, this tradition is also seen in surrealism, in horror films, and in the magic realism of Latin American cinema. Since Émile Cohl's *Fantasmagorie* (1908) depicted an artist surrounded by sketches and drawings whose life and activity are independent of him, expressive mise-en-scène has enlivened the terrifying, comical, and romantic worlds of many films, including *The Birds* (1963), in which birds become demonic; *Barton Fink* (1991), in which wallpaper sweats; and *The Hobbit: The Battle of Five Armies* (2014), which continues the fantastic landscapes and magical props of the franchise to create a material world infused with the metaphysics and ethics of good versus evil.

By contrast, in a *constructive mise-en-scène*, the theatrical world can be shaped and even altered through the work or desire of the characters. Films about putting together a play or even a movie are examples of this tradition as characters fabricate a new or alternative world through their power as actors or directors. In

François Truffaut's *Day for Night* (1973), for example, multiple romances and crises become entwined with the project of making a movie about romance and crises, and the movie set becomes a parallel universe in which day can be changed to night and sad stories can be made happy. Other films have employed constructive mise-en-scène to dramatize the wishes and dreams of their characters. In *Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory* (1971), the grim factory exterior hides a wonderland where, as one character sings, "You can even eat the dishes." Likewise, the mise-en-scène of *Being John Malkovich* (1999) constantly defies the laws of spatial logic, as Craig the puppeteer and his coworker Maxine struggle for the right to inhabit the body of the actor Malkovich.

VIEWING CUE

Describe why the mise-en-scène of the film you most recently watched fits best within a naturalistic or a theatrical tradition. Explain how this perspective helps you experience the film. Illustrate your position using two or three scenes as examples.

We rarely experience the traditions of naturalistic and theatrical mise-en-scène in entirely isolated states. Naturalism and theatrics sometimes alternate within the same film, and following the play and exchange between the two can be an exciting and productive way to watch movies and to understand the complexities of mise-en-scène in a film — of how place and its physical contours condition

and shape our experiences. In this context, Preston Sturges's *Sullivan's Travels* (1941) is a remarkable example of how the alternation between these two traditions can be the heart of the movie **[Figure 3.41]**. In this film, the lead character is Hollywood director John L. Sullivan, who after a successful career making films with titles like *So Long, Sarong*, decides to explore the world of suffering and deprivation as material for a serious realistic movie he intends to title *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* He subsequently finds himself catapulted into a grimy world of railroad boxcars and prison chain gangs, where he discovers, ironically, the power that the movie fantasies he once created have to delight and entertain others. The theatrical mise-en-scène of Hollywood, he learns, is as important to human life as the ordinary worlds people must inhabit.

A still from the movie Sullivan's Travels shows Joel McCrea.

3.41 ***Sullivan's Travels*** (1941). The opposition between the "real" world and Hollywood fantasy may not be as absolute as its director hero at first assumes.

There have been many movie “spectaculars” where the magnitude and intricacy of the mise-en-scène share equal emphasis with or even outshine the story, a tradition extending back to the 1914 Italian film *Cabiria* and continued with films like *Gone with the Wind* (1939), *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968), *Gangs of New York* (2002), *Avatar* (2009), and *Midway* (2019). The spectacular elements of these films can still contribute to a narrative. Low-budget independent films usually concentrate on the complexity of character, imagistic style, and narrative, but movie spectaculars attend to the stunning effects of sets, lighting, props, costumes, and casts of thousands. Movie spectaculars exploit one of the primary motivations of film viewing — the desire to be awed by worlds that exceed our day-to-day reality.

FILM IN FOCUS Naturalistic Mise-en-Scène in *Bicycle Thieves* (1948)

FILM IN FOCUS
LaunchPad

To watch a clip of *Bicycle Thieves* (1948), go to LaunchPad for *The Film Experience* at **launchpadworks.com**

The setting of Vittorio De Sica’s *Bicycle Thieves* (1948) is post–World War II Rome, a mise-en-scène whose stark and impoverished conditions are the most formidable obstacle to the central character’s longing for a normal life. Antonio Ricci, played by nonprofessional actor Lamberto Maggiorani, finds a job putting up movie posters, a humble but adequate way to support his wife and his son Bruno in an economically depressed city. When the bicycle he needs for work is stolen, he

desperately searches the massive city on foot, hoping to discover the bike before Monday morning, when he must continue his work.

The winding streets and cramped apartments of the actual Roman locations appear as bare, crumbling, and scarred surfaces. They create a frustrating and impersonal urban maze through which Ricci walks asking questions without answers, examining bikes that are not his, and following leads into strange neighborhoods where he is observed with hostile suspicion. In what was once the center of the Roman empire, masses of people wait for jobs, crowd onto buses, or sell their wares. The most basic materials of life take on disproportionate significance as props: the sheets on a bed, a plate of food, and an old bike are the center of existence. In the mise-en-scène, the generally bright lighting reveals mostly blank faces and walls of poverty.

Bicycle Thieves is among the most important films within the naturalistic tradition of mise-en-scène, which is associated specifically with the Italian neorealist movement of the late 1940s **[Figure 3.42]**. The laws of society and nature follow an almost mechanical logic that cares not at all for human hopes and dreams. Here, according to a truck driver, “Every Sunday, it rains.” In a large city of empty piazzas and anonymous crowds, physical necessities reign: food is a constant concern, most people are strangers, a person needs a bicycle to move around town, and rivers are more threatening than bucolic. Ricci and other characters become engulfed in the hostility and coldness of the pervasive mise-en-scène, and their encounters with Roman street life follow a path from hope to despair to resignation.

A still from the movie Bicycle Thieves shows a man walking in an empty street.

3.42 ***Bicycle Thieves*** (1948). The unadorned street locations of postwar Rome and an ordinary bicycle are at the heart of this naturalistic mise-en-scène.

In the beginning, objects and materials, such as the bed linens Ricci's wife pawns to retrieve his bicycle, offer promise for his family's security in a barren and anonymous cityscape. However, the promise of these and other material objects turns quickly to ironic emptiness: the bicycle is stolen, the marketplace overwhelms him with separate bicycle parts that can never be identified, and settings (such as the church into which he pursues one of the thieves) offer no consolation or comfort.

Finally, Ricci himself gets caught in this seemingly inescapable logic of survival when, unable to find his bike, he tries to steal another one. Only at the end of the day, when he discovers his son is not the drowned body pulled from the river, does he give up his search for the bicycle. Realizing that this setting and the objects in it will never provide him with meaning and value, he returns sadly home with the son he loves.

The purpose of *Bicycle Thieves* is to accentuate the common and everyday within a naturalistic tradition. Ricci and his neighbors dress as the struggling working-class population from whom the actors were cast, and the natural lighting progresses from dawn to dusk across the various locations that mark Ricci's progression through the day. This film's everyday mise-en-scène is especially powerful because without any dramatic signals, it remains permeated by the shadow of World War II. Even within the barest of everyday settings, objects, and clothing, *Bicycle Thieves* suggests the traces of history — such as Mussolini's sports stadium — that have created these impoverished conditions.

Along with these traces of history within its everyday mise-en-scène, we are reminded of a theatrical tradition that ironically counterpoints the film's realism. While performing his new duties in the first part of the film, Ricci puts up a glamorous poster of the U.S. movie star Rita Hayworth **[Figure 3.43]**. Later, the sets and props change when Ricci wanders from a workers' political meeting to an adjacent theater where a play is being rehearsed. In these instances, a poster prop and a stage setting become reminders of a world that has little place in the daily hardships of this mise-en-scène — a world where, as one character puts it, "movies bore me."

A still from the movie Bicycle Thieves shows a pair of hands putting up a sensual poster of Rita Hayworth.

3.43 ***Bicycle Thieves*** (1948). The glamour of Hollywood is evoked ironically in the protagonist's modest job putting up movie posters in the streets of postwar Rome.

For many modern viewers, Rome might be represented by that other theatrical tradition — as a city of magnificent fountains, glamorous people, and romantic restaurants. But for Ricci and his son, glamorous Rome is a strange place and a fake set. A touching scene in which they eat at a restaurant brings out the contrast between their lives and that of the rich patrons before they return to the streets they know. For Europeans who lived through World War II (in Rome or other cities), the glaring honesty of the film's mise-en-scène in 1948 was a powerful alternative to the glossy theatrical tradition of Hollywood sets and settings.

Chapter 3 Review

SUMMARY

- **Mise-en-scène** refers to elements of a movie like actors, lighting, sets and settings, costumes, make-up, and other features of the image that exist independent of the camera and the processes of filming and editing.
- The earliest movies depended on natural light. The introduction of artificial lighting in the 1900s allowed filmmakers to move film production into studios and onto elaborate **soundstages**.
    - On-location shooting came to prominence again around World War II, evident in Italian neorealist films and Hollywood crime dramas.
- **Settings** and **sets** establish **scenic realism** and atmosphere. **Props** are objects that function as parts of the set.
- **Actors** are usually at the center of mise-en-scène. **Performance** describes actors' use of language and physical expression to bring a character to life. **Leading actors** play the central characters in a film, while **supporting actors** play secondary characters. **Blocking** is the arrangement and movement of actors in relation to one another on a stage or set.
- Costumes are the clothing and related accessories that define specific characters. Make-up refers to cosmetics, including

prosthetics, applied to the actors' faces and bodies that highlight or distort certain features.

- **Lighting** can be natural or directional and can range from hard to soft. **Natural lighting** comes from a natural source, like sunlight or firelight. **Directional lighting** is deliberately set up to define and shape the object, area, or person being illuminated.
    - **Three-point lighting** is a common style of directional lighting that uses three sources: a **key light** to illuminate the object, **backlighting** to pick out the object from the background, and **fill lighting** that minimizes shadows.
    - **High-key lighting** is diffused, low-contrast lighting that reduces or eliminates hard edges and shadows and can be more flattering when filming people. **Low-key lighting** is a high-contrast style that creates hard edges, distinctive shadows, and a harsh effect.
- There are two prominent traditions of cinematic mise-en-scène: *naturalistic* and *theatrical*.
    - Naturalistic mise-en-scène appears to correspond to the real world and is recognizable to viewers. This category includes historical and everyday mise-en-scène.
    - Theatrical mise-en-scène presents locations and other elements so that they appear unfamiliar, exaggerated, or artificial. This category includes expressive mise-en-scène and constructive mise-en-scène.

KEY TERMS

mise-en-scène
soundstage
setting
set
realism
scenic realism
prop
prosthetics
lighting
natural lighting
set lighting
directional lighting
three-point lighting
key light
high-key lighting
low-key lighting
fill lighting
highlighting
backlighting
frontal lighting
sidelighting
underlighting
top lighting
hard lighting
soft lighting
chiaroscuro lighting
actor

performance
leading actor
character actor
supporting actor
extra
character type
blocking

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CHAPTER 4 CINEMATOGRAPHY
Framing What We See

Three stills from the 2018 film, Roma.

Description

The first still portrays a woman standing near a young boy seated under a thatched roof on a beach.

The second still depicts the woman running up the beach to the seashore.

The third still depicts the woman and three children in swimming clothes kneeling on the beach, embracing one another. A fourth child stands behind them.

Roma (2018) is a film steeped in filmmaker Alfonso Cuarón's memory of his childhood in Mexico City around 1970. Filmed in naturalistic black and white on a large-format digital camera that allows for finely detailed interplay between foreground and background, *Roma* tells the parallel and intertwined stories of domestic laborer Cleo and the middle-class family for whom she works. Cuarón — who became the first filmmaker in history to win Oscars for both Best Cinematography and Best Director in the same year for this film — combines subjectivity and objectivity in his idiosyncratic framing and panoramic location shots. For example, in the film's first image, water on paving stones reflects a patch of light in which the shadow of an airplane's flight can be traced, refracting and layering impressions of the past. Later, the city streets teem with rebellion as the central characters face their private dramas in a tableau carefully composed for the film's widescreen frames. Camera movement heightens the film's emotional crescendo, as a tracking shot follows Cleo and the family's youngest child on screen left as the older kids frolic in the surf on screen right. Cleo turns back to watch them, but soon the swimmers are no longer visible to us. The tension is almost unbearable

as the camera reverses direction to follow Cleo as she races back to pull them from the swelling waves. Although Cuarón had previously collaborated with award-winning cinematographer Emmanuel "Chivo" Lubezki on films like *Gravity*, he realized that in order for *Roma* to capture the impressions of his childhood accurately, he would have to shoot this one himself.

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Visual stimuli determine a significant part of our experience of the world around us. We look left and right for cars before we cross a busy street, we watch sunsets in the distance, we focus on a face across the room. Vision allows us to distinguish colors and light, to evaluate the sizes of things near and far, to track moving objects, or to invent shapes out of formless clouds. Vision also allows us to project ourselves into the world, to explore objects and places, and to transform them in our minds. In the cinema, we know the material world only as it is relayed to us through the filmed images and accompanying sounds that we process in our minds. The filming of those images is called **cinematography** — motion-picture photography (literally, "movement-writing").

This chapter describes the feature at the center of most individuals' experiences of movies — film images. Although film images may sometimes seem like windows on the world, they are purposefully

constructed and manipulated. Here we detail the subtle ways that cinematography composes individual movie images in order to communicate feelings, ideas, and other impressions.

KEY OBJECTIVES

- Outline the development of the film image from a historical heritage of visual forms.
- Describe how the frame of an image positions our point of view according to different distances, heights, and angles.
- Explain how film shots use the depth of the image in various ways.
- Identify how the elements of cinematography — film stock, camera or lens type, color, lighting, and compositional features of the image — can be employed in a movie.
- Compare and contrast the effects of different kinds of camera movement and lens adjustment.
- Introduce the array of methods used to create special effects.
- Explore the impact of digital technology on the art and practice of cinematography.
- Describe prevailing concepts of the film image within different cinematic conventions.

A Short History of the Cinematic Image

We go to the movies to enjoy stimulating sights, share other people's perspectives, and explore different worlds through the details contained in a film image. In Ingmar Bergman's *Persona* (1966), a woman's tense and mysterious face suggests the complex depths of her personality. At the beginning of *Saving Private Ryan* (1998), we share the visceral experience of confused and wounded soldiers as bullets zip across the ocean surface during the D-Day invasion in France **[Figure 4.1]**. *Zero Dark Thirty* (2013) uses a different approach for a different combat context: brightly and starkly lit images capture both an arid desert landscape and the brittle tension that seems to electrify the light **[Figure 4.2]**.

A still from the movie, Saving Private Ryan, depicts a close-up scene of soldiers dying on Normandy Beach.

4.1 ***Saving Private Ryan*** (1998). The film uses visceral camera work to bring viewers close to dying soldiers on D-Day.

A still from the movie, Zero Dark Thirty, captures two young men conversing in a desert. The still is saturated in color.

4.2 ***Zero Dark Thirty*** (2013). In a very different war, monochromatic cinematography conveys the tension that permeates the desert spaces.

Vision occurs when light rays reflected from an object strike the retina of the eye and stimulate our perception of that object's image in the mind. Photography (literally, "light writing") mimics vision in the way it registers light patterns onto film or codes them to be reproduced digitally. Yet whereas vision is continuous, photography freezes a single moment in the form of an image. Movies connect a series of these single moments and project them above a particular rate of frames per second to create the illusion of movement. **Apparent motion** is the psychological process that explains our perception of movement when watching films, in which the brain actively responds to the visual stimuli of a rapid sequence of still images exactly as it would in actual motion perception.

The human fascination with creating illusions is an ancient one. In *The Republic*, Plato writes of humans who are trapped in a cave and misinterpret shadows on the cave's wall for the actual world. Leonardo da Vinci describes how a light source entering a hole in a camera obscura (literally, "dark room") projects an upside-down image on the opposite wall, offering it as an analogy of human vision and anticipating the mechanism of the camera. One of the earliest technologies used to project images was the **magic lantern** — a device developed in the seventeenth century using a lens and a light source to project an image from a painted glass slide. In the eighteenth century, showmen used these to develop elaborate spectacles called *phantasmagoria*. The most famous of these were Étienne-Gaspard Robert's terrifying mobile projections of ghosts

and skeletons on columns of smoke in an abandoned Paris crypt. These fanciful devices provided the basis for the technology that drives modern cinematography and the film image's power to control, explain, and entertain. In this section, we examine the historical development of some of the key features in the production and projection of the film image.

1820s–1880s: The Invention of Photography and the Prehistory of Cinema

The components that finally converged in cinema — a photographic recording of reality and the animation of images — were central to the visual culture of the nineteenth century. Combining amusement and science, the phenakistoscope (developed in 1832) and the zoetrope (developed in 1834), among other precinema contraptions, allowed people to view a series of images in a manner that creates the illusion of a moving image.

In 1839, Louis-Jacques-Mandé Daguerre announced the first still photograph, building on the work of Joseph Nicéphore Niépce. Photography's mechanical ability to produce images of reality and make them readily available to the masses proved to be one of the most significant developments of the nineteenth century. In the 1880s, both Étienne-Jules Marey in France and Englishman Eadweard Muybridge, working in the United States, conducted

extensive studies of human and animal figures in motion using **chronophotography** — a series of still images that record incremental movement **[Figure 4.3]**. Muybridge's Zoopraxiscope, a rotating glass disk introduced in 1879, enabled moving images to be projected for the first time.

A series of 20 consecutive photographs show the frame by frame movement of a horseback rider while the horse jumps over a barricade.

4.3 Eadweard Muybridge's motion studies. Experimenting with still photographs of figures in motion, Muybridge laid the groundwork for cinematography.

1890s–1920s: The Emergence and Refinement of Cinematography

The official birth date of the movies is widely accepted as December 28, 1895, when the brothers Auguste and Louis Lumière debuted their Cinématographe, a device that combined camera and projector, at the Grand Café in Paris. They showed ten short films, including a famous scene of workers leaving the Lumière factory. The Lumières successfully joined two key elements: the ability to record a sequence of images on a flexible, transparent medium and the capacity to project the sequence.

The first movies consisted of a single moving image. The Lumières' *Niagara Falls* (1897) simply shows the famous falls and a group of bystanders, but its compositional balance of a powerful natural phenomenon and the people on its edge draws on a long history of painting, infusing the film with remarkable energy and beauty that motion renders almost sublime **[Figure 4.4]**. In the United States, W. K. L. Dickson, working for Thomas Edison, developed a motion picture camera patented as the Kinetograph in 1891. The early Edison films were shot in the Black Maria studio in New Jersey and viewed individually by looking into a Kinetoscope or "peep show" machine. One such film, *The Kiss* (1896), titillated viewers by giving them a playfully analytical snapshot of an intimate moment **[Figure 4.5]**.

A still from the documentary movie, Niagara Falls, shows a small group of people on the edge of a fenced cliff overlooking a large waterfall.

4.4 ***Niagara Falls*** (1897). One of the Lumière brothers' actualities, or nonfiction moving snapshots, shows the wonder and balance of a single moving image.

A black-and-white still from the movie, The Kiss, presents a close-up shot of a man and woman kissing.

4.5 ***The Kiss*** (1896). From the Edison company, one of the most famous early films regards an intimate moment.

In the early years of film history, technical innovations in the film medium and in camera and projection hardware were rapid and competitive. Eastman Kodak quickly established itself as the primary manufacturer of **film stock**, a length of unexposed film consisting of a flexible backing or base such as celluloid and a light-sensitive emulsion. The standard **nitrate** film base of 35mm film stock was highly flammable, and its pervasive use is one reason that so much of the world's silent film heritage is lost. Cellulose acetate film stocks or **safety film** were adopted but did not fully replace nitrate until the early 1950s.

After early competition among technologies, in 1909 the width of the film stock, or **film gauge**, used for filming and exhibiting movies was standardized as 35mm. In the 1920s, the smaller 16mm film was introduced for portable cameras and amateur filmmakers, and higher-resolution 70mm was experimented with for more spectacular effects. But 35mm remained the industry standard for film production and theatrical exhibition until challenged by digital formats at the end of the twentieth century **[Figures 4.6–4.8]**. By the 1920s, the rate at which moving images were recorded and later projected increased from sixteen frames to twenty-four frames per second (fps), a standard that offered more clarity and definition to moving images.

A 16-millimeter film gauge displays 10 black-and-white photos of a man leaning against a wall on the corridor of an apartment, captured in a long shot.

4.6 16mm film gauge drawn to scale. The lightweight cameras and portable projectors used with this format have been effective for documentary, newsreel, and independent films as well as for prints of films shown in educational and home settings.

A 35-millimeter film gauge displays four animated images of a woman captured in a close shot.

4.7 35mm film gauge drawn to scale. The standard gauge for theatrically released films was introduced in 1892 by Edison and was the dominant format for both production and exhibition until the end of the twentieth century.

A 70-millimeter film gauge displays four colored images of a piece of a bone against a blue backdrop.

4.8 70mm film gauge drawn to scale. A wide, high-resolution gauge was in use since the early days of the film industry but was highlighted in feature films in the 1950s for spectacular effect. A horizontal variant of 70mm is used for IMAX formats.

The silent film era saw major innovations in lighting and in mechanisms for moving the camera and varying the scale of shots. After 1926, **panchromatic stock**, which responded to a full spectrum of colors by rendering them as shades of gray, became the standard for black-and-white movies. Cameramen like Billy Bitzer, working with D. W. Griffith in the United States, and Karl Freund, shooting such German expressionist classics as *Metropolis* (1927), brought cinematographic art to a pinnacle of visual creativity. These visual achievements were adversely affected by the introduction of sound in 1927 because bulky and sensitive sound recording equipment created restrictions on outdoor and mobile shooting.

1930s–1940s: Developments in Color, Wide-Angle, and Small-Gauge Cinematography

After triumphing over other technologies for synchronizing sound and image, sound was recorded as an optical track directly on film, and technical innovations continued as the aesthetic potential of the medium was explored. By the 1930s, color processes had evolved from the individually hand-painted frames or tinted sequences of silent films, to colored stocks, and finally to the rich **Technicolor** process that dominated color film production until the 1950s. The Disney cartoon *Flowers and Trees* (1932) was the first to use

Technicolor's three-strip process, which recorded different colors separately, using a dye transfer process to create a single image with a full spectrum of color. Although color promised a new realism, initially it often was used to highlight artifice and spectacle, notably in *The Wizard of Oz* (1939) **[Figures 4.9a–4.9c]**.

Three stills from the movie, The Wizard of Oz, show the difference and impact of Technicolor on the movie. The stills are labeled (a) through (c).

4.9a–4.9c ***The Wizard of Oz*** (1939). **(a)** Viewers sometimes find the opening, sepia-tinted scenes of the film jarring. **(b)** When Dorothy first opens the door to Munchkinland, the drab tints of Kansas are left behind. **(c)** Technicolor's saturated primary colors are so important in

the film that the silver slippers described in the book were changed to ruby slippers for the screen.

Description
The still (a) depicts a girl holding a dog in a house and reacting as a window comes off the wall.

The still (b) shows the girl standing inside a house and opening a door. Outside the door is a colorful landscape of a countryside, while the girl and the inside of the home are tinted in sepia.

The still (c) shows the girl and dog with a woman in a large dress and crown, surrounded by individuals. The clothing of those in the still and the countryside are depicted in bright colors.

Meanwhile, the introduction of new **camera lenses** (pieces of curved glass that focus light rays in order to form an image on film) allowed cinematographers new possibilities. Wide-angle, telephoto, and zoom lenses use different **focal lengths** (the distance from the center of the lens to the point where light rays meet in sharp focus) that alter the perspective relations of an image. A wide-angle lens has a short focal length, a **telephoto lens** (a lens with a focal length of at least 75mm and capable of magnifying and flattening distant objects) has a long one, and a **zoom lens** has a variable focal length. The range of perspectives offered by these advancements allowed for better resolution, wider angles, more variation in perspective, and more **depth of field** — the range or distance before and behind the main focus of a shot within which objects remain relatively sharp and clear.

During the 1920s, filmmakers used gauzy fabrics and, later, special lenses to develop a so-called soft style that could highlight the main action or character. From the mid-1930s through the 1940s, the **wide-angle lens** was developed and used. This is a lens with a short focal length, typically less than 35mm, that allows cinematographers to explore a depth of field that can simultaneously show foreground and background objects or events in focus. Cinematographer Gregg Toland is closely associated with refinements in using wide-angle lenses for his dramatic, *deep-focus* cinematography on Orson Welles's *Citizen Kane* (1941) and William Wyler's *The Heiress* (1949) **[Figure 4.10]**.

A black-and-white still from the movie, The Heiress, shows a well-dressed woman standing in front of a mirror inside a mansion.

4.10 ***The Heiress*** (1949). Gregg Toland's cinematography uses wide-angle lenses and faster film stocks to create images with greater depth of field. Both foreground and background are in sharp focus.

Description
The mirror shows the full-view of the girl. The shot is taken from the top of the stairs behind her.

Camera technology developed with the introduction of more lightweight **handheld cameras** that were widely used during World War II for newsreels and other purposes. These lightweight cameras could be carried by the operator rather than mounted on a tripod. Small-gauge production also expanded during this period, with 8mm film developed in 1932 for the amateur filmmaker and the addition of sound and color to the 16mm format. The portability and affordability of 16mm film encouraged its use in educational films and other documentaries as well as in low-budget independent and avant-garde productions such as Maya Deren and Alexander Hammid's *Meshes of the Afternoon* (1943).

1950s–1960s: Widescreen, 3-D, and New Color Processes

The early 1950s witnessed the arrival of several **widescreen processes** that widened the image's **aspect ratio** (the width-to-height ratio of the film frame as it appears on a movie screen, television, or monitor). The dimensions of the movie screen changed from a near-square to a rectangular frame. The larger

image was introduced in part to distinguish the cinema from the new competition of television. One of the most popular of these processes in the 1950s, CinemaScope, used an **anamorphic lens** — a camera lens that compresses the horizontal axis of an image onto a strip of 35mm film and a projector lens that "unsqueezes" such an image to produce a widescreen image. Other widescreen films, such as the historical epic *Lawrence of Arabia* (1962), used a wider film gauge of 70mm to render spectacular scenes of desert warfare **[Figure 4.11]**. This period, during which the popularity of television urged motion-picture producers to develop more spectacular displays, also saw a craze for 3-D movies such as *House of Wax* (1953). By 1954, more than half of Hollywood movies were shot in color, and color soon became the norm, facilitated by the introduction of Eastman color as an alternative to the proprietary, three-strip Technicolor process.

A panoramic view of the movie, Lawrence of Arabia, depicts a wide desert landscape where men ride on camels and carry flags.

4.11 ***Lawrence of Arabia*** (1962). The film's 70mm widescreen format is suited to panoramic desert scenes and military maneuvers.

In the 1960s, Hollywood began to court the youth market, and cinematographers experimented more aggressively with ways to distort or call attention to the image by using one or more of the following tools:

Think about the cinematography of a film you have seen in relation to the larger history of the image. Do certain shots seem like paintings, photographs, or other kinds of visual display? Explain how visual references within a specific shot or series of shots affect your understanding or interpretation of the film.

- a **filter**, a transparent sheet of glass or gels placed in front of the lens to create various effects;
- a **flare**, a spot or flash of white light created by directing strong light directly at the lens;
- a telephoto lens, a lens that has a focal length of at least 75mm and is capable of magnifying and flattening distant objects; and
- **zooming**, rapidly changing focal length of a camera to move the image closer or farther away.

Amateur filmmaking was enhanced by the Super 8 format introduced in 1965, which brought better picture quality and was easier to work with than 8mm film.

1970s–1980s: Cinematography and Exhibition in the Age of the

Blockbuster

In the 1970s, the flexibility of **camera movement** was greatly enhanced with the use of the *Steadicam*. This camera stabilization system introduced in 1976 allows a camera operator to film a continuous and steady shot. It is responsible for the uncanny camera movements of *The Shining* (1980). Special-effects technology also developed rapidly in the era of the blockbuster ushered in by *Jaws* (1975) and *Star Wars* (1977), movies with expensive budgets that promised shocking, stunning, or simply wondrous images. Although the robotic shark in *Jaws* remained mostly unseen, George Lucas's Industrial Light & Magic used both traditional models and computer-based effects to characterize the *Star Wars* franchise and, in time, much of Hollywood film culture **[Figure 4.12]**.

A still from the movie, Jaws, shows a man in a boat confronting a shark that tries to attack him.

4.12 ***Jaws*** (1975). This Steven Spielberg film ushered in the blockbuster era with surprisingly modest special effects. A full glimpse of the mechanical shark, known on set as “Bruce,” is not seen until ninety minutes into the film.

The spectacular qualities of motion pictures are on display in the **IMAX** format and projection system developed in the 1970s. The IMAX large-format film system is projected horizontally rather than vertically to produce an image approximately ten times larger than the standard 35mm frame. The higher resolution was displayed in special venues featuring giant screens and stepped seating. Today many theater chains have adopted a digital version of IMAX that allows them to project in this format without the system's original size and space requirements.

In the 1970s, documentary filmmakers and artists also began to shoot on **video** — a medium used for television that captures and displays moving images electronically — as a distinct alternative to filming on celluloid. Although the quality of video images at the time was inferior to that of film images, the high costs and inconvenience of film stock and developing made video an appealing format. With the development of camcorders and videocassette recorders (VCRs) in the 1980s, video spread widely among consumers. Evolving broadcast and consumer video technologies (including Portapak, U-matic, Beta, and VHS) were analog formats, which converted a continuous signal into one at an analogous speed in order to record on magnetic tape. Analog video paved the way for the industrial and consumer embrace of even more lightweight and versatile digital video in the next decade.

1990s to the Present: The Digital Era

The shift to digital filmmaking is a critical transition in the history of cinematography. Rather than being recorded on film or magnetic tape, digital images are captured and stored as binary code on hard drives or other storage media. Digital formats do not use film stock and thus do not require processing in a laboratory, physical editing, or printing effects. The process is less costly and allows for manipulation and exact reproduction of the image at various stages of the filmmaking and exhibition process. Digital technologies were adopted for different phases of the production and postproduction processes at different rates. For example, the development of nonlinear editing systems greatly improved efficiency, and digital editing was quickly incorporated into independent and studio filmmaking in the 1990s. However, it took until the 2000s for **digital cinematography** — shooting with a camera that records and stores visual information electronically as digital code — to became a viable alternative to 35mm film in terms of image quality within the industry.

As early as the mid-1970s, the film industry developed digital technology to create visual effects and generate title sequences in films like *Westworld* (1973) and *Superman* (1978). Since then, effects work has become a chief area of innovation, driving the growth of science fiction and superhero franchises. Animation, historically dominated by Walt Disney Studios, became a more important sector

of the film market with the advent of **computer-generated imagery (CGI)**, especially in the productions of Pixar and DreamWorks studios and in Disney's more recent computer-animated films. (See Chapter 9 for more on traditional and digital animation.)

Technically, the digital image brought certain advantages. With lightweight and mobile cameras, digital moviemaking can be more intimate than 35mm cinematography, which involves large cameras and more crew members. Initially, the quality of digital images suggested the immediacy of home movies or news or surveillance footage in films like Thomas Vinterberg's acerbic family drama *The Celebration* (1998). For independent filmmakers, digital images were a vast improvement over the quality of analog video for projection and offered an alternative to the expense of film. For Rebecca *Miller's Personal Velocity* (2002), for example, cinematographer Ellen Kuras films three women's stories with emotional texture and intimacy using mini-DV (digital video) cassettes. Digital cinematography is not restricted by the length of a reel of film, allowing for longer takes, a dimension central to Alejandro González Iñárritu and cinematographer Emmanuel Lubezki in *Birdman* (2014). Early adopters like Robert Rodriguez, who shot the sequels to his breakthrough big-budget film *Spy Kids* (2001) on high-definition digital **[Figure 4.13]**, found that the flexibility of digital filmmaking enhanced creativity and allowed him to remain based in Austin, Texas.

A still from the movie, Spy Kids 2: The Island of the Lost Dreams, shows a boy and a girl standing near an advanced electronic device, which produces a digital image.

4.13 ***Spy Kids 2: The Island of Lost Dreams*** (2002). Director Robert Rodriguez embraced the innovations of digital cinematography in the second installment of this endearing, spectacular trilogy.

Digital cinematography also has disadvantages, especially evident when it was first introduced. Digital images are recorded and displayed in pixels (densely packed dots) rather than the grain produced by the celluloid emulsion used for film. A cinematographer could predict how a particular film stock responds to light, but shooting digitally depends more on familiarity with the camera's capabilities. However, with improvements in frame rate, resolution, and light sensitivity, digital cameras became attractive even to studio filmmakers. Ultimately, greater processing power and storage capacity enabled digital technology to transform cinematography from the amateur to the blockbuster level. *Star Wars: Episode II — Attack of the Clones* (2002) was the first high-profile film to be shot in high-definition (HD) digital video. In 2009, cinematographer Anthony Dod Boyle was the first to win an Oscar for a film shot partly in digital formats, *Slumdog Millionaire* (2008). At the other end of the spectrum, the feature film *Tangerine* (2015) was shot on the streets of Los Angeles on an iPhone 6 **[Figure 4.14]**.

A still from the movie, Tangerine, shows a seated transgender woman in a conversation with another individual.

4.14 ***Tangerine*** (2015). The do-it-yourself promise of digital technology is reflected in this breakthrough depiction of transgender women's lives and loves on the streets of Los Angeles, shot an iPhone and released theatrically.

Both traditional film and digital cinematography have their aesthetic champions, a debate explored in the 2012 documentary *Side by Side* that has continued to evolve with rapid technological advances. Innovations within the film industry like better lenses and the high-end Genesis, RedOne, and Alexa cameras attempt to surpass the quality of shooting on film. In 2009, the first Hollywood features were shot in high-definition video with **4K resolution** (referring to the number of pixels composing the image). The image quality was roughly equivalent to that of 35mm film, and soon digital cinematography eclipsed shooting on film as an industry standard. In 2018, only twenty-four Hollywood films were shot in whole or in part on traditional film.

Sometimes the push for technological enhancement exceeds the norms of human perception. For example, the high frame rate of 48 frames per second in Peter Jackson's *Hobbit* franchise (2012–2014) was critiqued for looking artificial. Meanwhile, industry auteurs like Christopher Nolan, Paul Thomas Anderson, and Quentin Tarantino cultivate reputations as purists who continue to shoot on film, exploring the capacity of enhanced formats like 70mm. Greta Gerwig chose to shoot her 2019 adaptation of *Little Women* on film to suit the warmth and intimacy of its historical subject as well as to make a statement about what kinds of films and filmmakers can set aesthetic standards through such choices **[Figure 4.15]**.

A still from the movie, Little Women, shows a panoramic view of a field in New England during autumn.

4.15 ***Little Women*** (2019). The autumnal tones of the film's nineteenth-century New England setting are rendered more subtly by the choice to shoot on 35mm film.

Even works shot on film are typically completed using digital technology, which has revolutionized postproduction and profoundly changed the role of the cinematographer. While the *cinematographer* (also known as a *director of photography* or *D.P.*) was traditionally central only to the production phase of filmmaking, the widespread adoption of the **digital intermediate (DI)** — a digital scan of the edited film — has expanded the D.P.'s role into postproduction. The convenience and aesthetic potential of this technology were seized on, as the cinematographer and the visual effects supervisor collaborate on color grading and other elements of the image. On *O Brother Where Art Thou?* (2000), for example, cinematographer Roger Deakins used the digital intermediate not only to enhance certain sequences but to adjust the entire film to a sepia tone. Thus, the role and expertise of the cinematographer today extends beyond image capture.

New kinds of equipment and shifts in production norms have also made space for women finally to enter the production role that has historically been least open to them. D.P. Rachel Morrison became the first woman nominated for an Oscar for Best Cinematography for Dee Rees's *Mudbound* (2017) **[Figure 4.16]** and continued her collaboration with director Ryan Coogler on his blockbuster *Black Panther* (2018).

A still from the movie, Mudbound, shows the silhouette of a farmer as he overlooks a distant and colorful sunset.

4.16 ***Mudbound*** (2017). Rachel Morrison's atmospheric cinematography for this evocative drama about the intertwined fates of black and white families in the Mississippi Delta earned her an Oscar nomination, the first for a woman director of photography.

Although the debate between shooting on film and shooting on digital continues to have aesthetic currency, economics has decided the question of exhibition in favor of digital. *Avatar* (2009) ushered in a second era of 3-D spectaculars using digital technology, and theaters worldwide were obliged to convert projection systems from 35mm to digital to accommodate these new films. By 2012, digital projection from a hard drive called a **digital cinema package (DCP)** — a collection of digital files that store and convey audio, image, and data streams — surpassed 35mm film exhibition. By 2019, the projection on film of Quentin Tarantino's *Once Upon a Time … in Hollywood* was touted as a rare and nostalgic experience. The work of great cinematographers of previous eras is encountered in digital remasters.

The Elements of Cinematography

The basic unit of cinematography and the visual heart of cinema is the **shot** — a continuous point of view (initially a continuously exposed piece of film) between two edits. During a single shot, the camera may move forward or backward, up or down, but the film does not **cut** to another point of view or image. A cinematographer shooting a high schooler's home the morning after a wild party may depict the scene in different ways. One version might show the entire room — with its broken window, a fallen chair, and a man slumped in the corner — as a single shot that surveys the wreckage from a calm distance. Another version might show the same scene in a rapid succession of shots — the window, the chair, and the man — creating a visual disturbance missing in the first version. What viewers see onscreen depends on the cinematographer's point of view.

On set, the director and cinematographer film multiple **takes** of each shot from a unique camera setup in order to have choices when editing the film. Multiple camera setups are used to film a single scene, including a **master shot** of all the action and closer shots of each character as they speak their lines or react to others. In postproduction, this **coverage** gives the editor enough footage to shape the scene in different ways. Creating and conveying meaning to an audience can be done within a remarkable range of options in

the camera department — including framing, depth, color, and movement. For the astute viewer, recognizing and analyzing how these options are used in a film can be one of the most satisfying ways to experience and understand it.

Point of View

In cinematographic terms, **point of view** refers to the position from which a person, an event, or an object is seen or filmed. All shots have a point of view. A **subjective point of view** re-creates the perspective of a character as seen through the camera, whereas an **objective point of view** does not associate the impersonal perspective of the camera with that of a specific character. Scenes of the road ahead capture Furiosa's subjective point of view as she drives in *Mad Max: Fury Road* (2015), whereas an establishing shot of the citadel from which she flees is objective.

A scene's point of view may be discontinuous. For instance, in the suspenseful climactic prom scene of *Carrie* (1976), as one of the protagonist's classmates, Sue, watches the crowning of the prom king and queen from backstage, she spots a rope leading above the curtain and follows it with her eyes before investigating where it leads **[Figures 4.17a–4.17d]**. The gym teacher watches but does not understand Sue's movements. A point-of-view shot from under the stage reveals where Chris and her boyfriend are hiding to play a cruel trick on Carrie. Finally, Carrie's humiliation leads to a distorted

point-of-view shot of a laughing crowd of students, which incites her to punish them with her telekinetic powers.

Four stills from the movie, Carrie, labeled (a) through (d), show four different points of view.

4.17a–4.17d ***Carrie*** (1976). Brian De Palma utilizes different points of view in a single sequence: **(a)** an overhead shot that shows Sue's realization of the cruel trick about to be played on Carrie; **(b)** an objective shot that introduces a teacher's subjective point of view;

(c) a shot from the perspective of the hidden perpetrators; and **(d)** the distorted perception of the victim.

Description
The still (a) shows an overhead shot of a bucket positioned with a rope on an overhead wooden beam. The still (b) is a close-up shot of a teacher among the audience. The still (c) shows a viewpoint from just off and below the stage, looking up at the individuals on the stage. The still (d) shows the repeated image of a smiling couple.

In Emmanuel Lubezki's immersive cinematography for *The Revenant* (2015), the camera moves through the chaos of a Native attack on a party of fur trappers as if it is participating in the action, shifting from subjective to objective and then to another subjective point of view in a continuous take.

Four Attributes of the Shot

Every shot orchestrates four important attributes: framing, depth of field, color, and movement. The distance, angle, and height of the camera determine the portion of the filmed subject that appears within the borders of the frame. These elements make **framing** one of the key aesthetic choices in filmmaking.

The range or distance before and behind the main focus of a shot within which objects remain relatively sharp and clear is its depth of field. Elements of cinematography such as choice of film stock and

lighting give an image its particular visual quality. None is as prominent as color, which conveys aesthetic impressions as well as visual cues. Finally, a film image or shot may depict or incorporate movement. When the camera moves or the borders of the image are altered by a change in the focal length of the camera lens to follow an action or explore a space, it is called a **mobile frame**. For example, during the championship match in *Bend It Like Beckham* (2002), mobile framing shows the protagonist as she darts down the field on her way to scoring the winning goal. The movement of the shot captures the strength and dexterity of her strides in a single motion **[Figure 4.18]**.

A still from the movie, Bend it like Beckham, shows a girl in a soccer uniform running with the soccer ball.

4.18 ***Bend It Like Beckham*** (2002). A mobile camera increases the viewer's excitement during the winning goal.

Framing

VIEWING CUE

Go to **launchpadworks.com** to watch the clip from *Touch of Evil* (1958), and make a sketch or sketches of each shot. Describe how the framing and depth of field contribute to perception of the scene.

A screenshot of a paused video shows a scene from the movie, Touch of Evil. A play button is present at the center of the screenshot.

Description

The scene shows two men engaged in a conversation.

Although we may not be accustomed to attending to every individual image in a movie, each shot involves careful construction by filmmakers and rewards close observation by viewers. The square or rectangle shape of the frame is usually taken for granted. In an early experiment with the power of framing, Abel Gance's *Napoléon* (1927) orchestrated images to appear simultaneously on three side-by-side screens at the film's rousing climax, culminating with red and blue tinted projections on either side, recalling the French flag. Since then, filmmakers have experimented with and refined ways to manipulate the film frame. A **canted frame** is framing that is not level, creating an unbalanced appearance. It is produced by tilting the camera to the side. Such unbalanced framing famously recurs in *The Third Man* (1949) to indicate that things are not always what they appear to be **[Figure 4.19]**. But even when the shape or alignment of the frame itself is not altered, framing determines what we see.

A still from the black-and-white movie, The Third Man, shows a man holding a gun. The background behind him is tilted to the right.

4.19 ***The Third Man*** (1949). Suspicions about Orson Welles's character Harry Lime are reinforced by the canted framing.

The three dimensions of the film image — the height and width of the frame and the apparent depth of the image — offer endless opportunities for representing the world and the ways we see it. Here we examine and detail formal possibilities that, when recognized, enrich our experience of the movies.

Aspect Ratio

Like the frame of a painting, the basic shape of the film image on the screen determines the composition. The aspect ratio is the width-to-height ratio of the film frame as it appears on a movie screen or television monitor. *Grand Illusion* (1937), *Citizen Kane* (1941), and most films made before the 1950s employ the **academy ratio** of 1.37:1. This aspect ratio of screen width to height was adopted by the American Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences as the industry standard in 1932 and was used by most films until the introduction of widescreen ratios in the 1950s. The dimensions of these films are similar to those of early television screens and are rendered as 4:3 in digital formats. This almost-square image draws on associations between the film frame and both windows and picture frame. **Widescreen ratios**, which have largely replaced academy ratio since the early 1950s, range from 1.66:1 to CinemaScope at 2.35:1. The wider image allows for grander and more spectacular cinematography. The widescreen ratio 1.85:1 is widely prevalent and corresponds to the digital aspect ratio 16:9 —

the shape of widescreen television sets and computer screens **[Figure 4.20]**.

A still from the movie, Support the Girls, shows a restaurant with five young women in uniform speaking with another woman around a table.

4.20 ***Support the Girls*** (2018). The 1.85:1 ratio introduced in 1953 quickly replaced the square format and remains in use for its ability to capture both intimacy and spatial relations among figures and setting.

Aspect ratios often shape our experience to align with the themes and actions of the film. For example, CinemaScope uses an anamorphic lens to compress an image that will be uncompressed during projection to achieve a widescreen ratio of 2.35:1. It was first introduced for spectacles like religious epics and musicals. In Nicholas Ray's 1955 drama of teenage frustration and fear, *Rebel Without a Cause*, the elongated horizontal CinemaScope frame depicts the loneliness and isolation of Jim Stark (played by James Dean) in a potentially violent showdown with a high school rival and bully **[Figure 4.21]**. Outside the planetarium, Ray's cinematography conveys the city below as an unreachable place for these small-town youths who seem overwhelmed by social and psychological distances. Compared to the more confined frame of *Citizen Kane*, which depicts a man who is driven to control the world, the widescreen space in *Rebel Without a Cause* suits the fitful searching of restless teens. Both films use carefully composed frames that highlight their respective screen dimensions.

A still from the movie, Rebel Without a Cause, depicts Jim Stark cornered on the top of an observatory by another man. The background shows an expansive view of Los Angeles.

4.21 ***Rebel Without a Cause*** (1955). Nicholas Ray uses the exaggerated width of the CinemaScope frame to show Jim Stark (James Dean) cornered above the streets of Los Angeles.

Although aspect ratio may not be a crucial determinant in every movie — both 1.85:1 and 2.35:1 are used widely today — it does not escape the consideration of the filmmaker. Stanley Kubrick shot his war film *Full Metal Jacket* (1987) in academy ratio rather than widescreen, which had become standard by the time he shot the film. With this choice, Kubrick emphasizes a central theme: that the Vietnam War entered world consciousness through the box-like screen of television. More recently, Pawel Pawlikowsky chose academy ratio for his film about the austere life of a Polish nun, *Ida* (2013) **[Figure 4.22]**. The verticality of the frame and the consistent use of space above the characters' heads evokes both spirituality and the oppressiveness of the unspoken. In *The Grand Budapest Hotel* (2014), the aspect ratio changes when the film's action shifts to the 1940s, emulating films of that period.

A still from the movie, Ida, depicts four nuns praying in a convent. The frame is square with the nuns shown only in the lower half of the image.

4.22 ***Ida*** (2013). This film's square aspect ratio and careful, consistent framing capture the young nun's circumscribed existence.

The changes in film ratios over the years have presented interesting challenges when movies appear on television or are recorded to tape or disc. For a long time, most television broadcasts and home video releases of widescreen films were reformatted to fit square TV screens through the **pan-and-scan process**. In this process, a computer-controlled scanner determines the most important action in the image and then crops peripheral action and space or presents the original frame as two separate images. Reframing the image in these ways causes loss of elements of the picture. Wider aspect ratios can be preserved on square TV screens by the **letterbox** format, in which the top and bottom strips of the frame are blacked out to accommodate a widescreen image.

DVDs, developed in 1995, made letterboxing much more common, and since the popularization of digital media a decade later, television sets have been manufactured to display the horizontal proportions of widescreen cinema frames. Wider aspect ratios are commonly slightly cropped to fill a flatscreen television, although some 2.35:1 features are now letterboxed. Blu-rays and DVDs tend to be more accurate in preserving **native aspect ratio**, although even these formats can be adjusted slightly to fill a TV screen.

Masks

Besides the proportions determined by the aspect ratio, a film frame can be reshaped by various **masks** — attachments to the camera or lights to cut off portions of the frame so that part of the image is

blocked and the eye is directed to the subject of the shot. Mostly associated with silent films like D. W. Griffith's *Intolerance* (1916), a mask may open only a corner of the frame, create a circular effect, or leave just a strip in the center of the frame visible. Martin Scorsese's knowledge of film history informs his frequent use of masking. The social restrictions that inhibit the love of the central couple in his 1993 adaptation of Edith Wharton's novel *The Age of Innocence* are signaled in his use of masking around the edges of the frame **[Figure 4.23]**.

A still from the movie, The Age of Innocence, shows three well-dressed people on a balcony.

4.23 ***The Age of Innocence*** (1993). Scorsese's use of masking softens the shape of the frame, concentrating our gaze on details that betray the characters' feelings in this historical drama.

Description
Two people are in full color near the center of the frame, while the third is shrouded in a shadow effect that borders the left and right frames.

In an **iris** shot, the corners of the frame are masked in a black, usually circular, form. In Harold Lloyd's *The Freshman* (1925), a shot of a timid collegian first appears in an iris-in (a transition that expands the small circle to reveal the entire image) to show him surrounded by a crowd of hostile football players. Conversely, a full image may be reduced, as an iris-out (a transition that gradually obscures the whole image by decreasing the circle to focus on one object), to isolate and emphasize a specific object or action in that image. In *The Night of the Hunter* (1955), an iris-out follows the demonic preacher as he walks toward the house of the children he threatens **[Figure 4.24]**. Such techniques are often adapted to cartoons or used in modern movies like the *Star Wars* franchise in self-conscious reference to an earlier filmmaking style.

A still from the movie, The Night of the Hunter, shows a man in a suit walking toward a house. The circular shot is centered on him, with the outer edges of the rectangular frame in black.

4.24 ***The Night of the Hunter*** (1955). An iris-out emphasizes the threat of a figure of evil.

Composition

As with any visual medium, the arrangement of the pictorial elements within the frame is crucial in cinematography. **Onscreen space** refers to the space visible within the frame of the image, whereas **offscreen space** is the implied space or world that exists outside the film frame. Onscreen space is carefully composed so that the position, scale, and balance of objects or lines within the frame direct our attention or determine our attitude toward what is being represented. Composition may create interest in the foreground or background, drawing the eye into the image through depth cues, or may make use of static vertical and horizontal lines or dynamic diagonals. Wes Anderson's style is instantly recognizable in his frequent use of symmetrical compositions **[Figure 4.25]**.

A shot from the movie, The Grand Budapest Hotel, shows a man, smoking a pipe, walking up the stairs in the center of the still. The stairs and walls of the frame are identical on both sides.

4.25 ***The Grand Budapest Hotel*** (2014). Director Wes Anderson's symmetrical compositions are an instantly recognizable feature of his style. When the film switches aspect ratios, it uses different compositional strategies for square and rectangular frames.

Some practices of composition are so widely adopted that they are referred to as rules. For example, the **rule of thirds** is a technique that imagines the frame divided horizontally and vertically into thirds and dictates placing objects along these lines for maximum visual interest. Leaving **lead room** — the space in front and in the direction of an object being filmed — balances the viewer's tendency to look at that space. While certain compositions are frequently used, there are infinite ways to fill a film frame, and the distinctiveness of a director's collaboration with a cinematographer may lie in the exceptions that they make to these rules.

VIEWING CUE

Identify the original aspect ratio of the film you are studying in class. How is it appropriate or inappropriate to this film's themes and aims? If the film is exhibited in a different ratio, explain how that process affects certain scenes.

The action taking place in offscreen space is usually less important than the action occurring in the frame, as when a close-up focuses on an intimate conversation and excludes other people in the room. Offscreen space sometimes contains important information that will be revealed in a subsequent image, however, as when one person engaged in conversation looks beyond the edge of the frame toward a glaring rival shown in the next shot. Offscreen spaces in horror films like *Alien* (1979) seethe with a menace that is more

terrifying because it is not visible **[Figure 4.26]**. In Robert Bresson's films, offscreen space suggests a spiritual world that exerts pressure on but eludes the fragmented and limited perspectives of the characters within the frame **[Figure 4.27]**.

A still from the movie, Alien, shows a close-up shot of an anxious woman looking out through a window.

4.26 ***Alien*** (1979). The horror genre makes significant use of offscreen space to generate suspense. What is Ripley (Sigourney Weaver) going to see?

A still from the movie, L'Argent, shows a close-up shot of a hand holding a man by his shirt.

4.27 ***L'Argent*** (1983). The agency of characters in Robert Bresson's films often seems to be limited by external forces that are signified by the emphasis on offscreen space.

Camera Distance

Another significant aspect of framing is the distance of the camera from its subject, which determines the **scale** of the shot, signals point of view, and contributes greatly to how we understand or feel about what is being shown. **Close-ups** (abbreviated CU in scripts and notes) are framings that show details of a person or an object, such as the face or hands or a flowerpot on a windowsill, perhaps indicating nuances of the character's feelings or thoughts or suggesting the special significance of the object **[Figure 4.28]**. Conventionally, female stars were depicted in close-up to signal glamour or emotion. An **extreme close-up** (ECU) is a shot that is framed comparatively tighter than a close-up, singling out, for instance, an insect or a hand. As used by filmmakers like Quentin Tarantino, the framing can be a dramatic way to direct the viewer's attention and a striking compositional element **[Figure 4.29]**.

A still from the black-and-white movie, Vivre sa vie, shows the expression of a woman in a close-up shot from the shoulders up.

4.28 ***Vivre sa vie*** (1962). A close-up of the film's protagonist leads the viewer to speculate about her thoughts.

A close-up shot from the movie, Jackie Brown, shows a hand flipping through a stack of hundred-dollar bills.

4.29 ***Jackie Brown*** (1997). An extreme close-up of the cash that entangles the film's assorted cast of characters.

VIEWING CUE

Look for a pattern of framing distances in the next film you view for class. Do there seem to be a large number of long shots? Close-ups? Explain how this pattern reinforces themes of the film.

At the other end of the compositional spectrum, a **long shot (LS)** places considerable distance between the camera and the scene, object, or person being filmed so that the object or person is recognizable but is defined by the large space and background. An **extreme long shot (ELS)** is framed from a comparatively greater distance than a long shot; the surrounding space dominates human figures. The larger space of the image dwarfs objects or human figures, such as with distant vistas of cities or landscapes. Most films feature a combination of these long shots — sometimes to show distant action or objects, sometimes to establish a context for events, and sometimes, as with the introduction and conclusion of *Shane* (1953), to emphasize the isolation and mystery of a character in the distance **[Figures 4.30a and 4.30b]**.

Two stills, (a) and (b), show two long shots from the movie, Shane.

4.30a and 4.30b *Shane* (1953). Barely seen, Shane approaches through an extreme long shot. Then the mysterious figure becomes more recognizable in a long shot.

Description
The still (a) shows a startled deer standing at a pond as it looks at a man riding a horse from a long distance. The still (b) shows a man riding a horse by the bank of the pond.

Between close-ups and long shots, a **medium shot** is a middle-ground framing in which we see the body of a person from approximately the waist up. A medium shot of the scientist played by Kate McKinnon in *Ghostbusters* (2016) shows part of her laboratory behind her **[Figure 4.31]**. A **medium long shot** slightly increases the distance between the camera and the subject compared with a medium shot, showing a three-quarter-length view of a character (from approximately the knees up). This framing often is used in westerns when a cowboy's weapon is an important element of the mise-en-scène **[Figure 4.32]**.

A still from the movie, Ghostbusters, shows a scientist in a laboratory filled of equipment.

4.31 ***Ghostbusters*** (2016). Physical comedy requires framing wide enough to allow for interaction between the characters and the mise-en-scène. A medium shot captures the scientist in the context of her lab.

A still from the Hollywood western movie, Red River, shows a gunman brandishing a pistol. The shot is wide with the actor in the center of the frame.

4.32 *Red River* (1948). The medium long shot was often used in westerns to keep weapons in view. French critics dubbed it the *plan américain* or "American shot."

A very common framing in conversation scenes, the **medium close-up** shows a character's head and shoulders. Melodramatic or romantic films about personal relationships may feature a predominance of medium close-ups and medium shots that capture the facial expressions of the characters. In *Ginger & Rosa* (2012), which focuses on a young woman's coming of age, the protagonist's view of the behavior of the people around her is frequently captured in medium close-up **[Figure 4.33]**. Open-air adventures — such as *Seven Samurai* (1954), the tale of a sixteenth-century Japanese village that hires warriors for protection — tend to use more long shots and extreme long shots in order to depict the battle scenes. As these descriptions imply, framing is defined relatively. There is no absolute cut-off point between a medium shot and a medium long shot, for example. As we have seen, the most common reference point for the scale of the image is the size of the human figure within the frame, a measure that is not a universal element of the cinematic image. The significance of framing patterns arises in the context of a particular film, genre, or style.

A still from the movie, Ginger and Rosa, shows a close-up shot of a young girl.

4.33 ***Ginger & Rosa*** (2012). In this coming-of-age story set in the 1960s, the heroine's perspective is emphasized by frequent medium close-ups of her taking in what's happening around her.

Although many shots are taken from approximately eye level, the **camera height** also can vary to present a particular compositional element or evoke a character's perspective. Japanese director Yasujiro Ozu's signature camera level is low to the ground, an ideal position for filming Japanese interiors, where characters sit on the floor **[Figure 4.34]**. A camera might be placed higher to show large-scale objects, such as tall buildings or landscapes **[Figure 4.35]**. A **crane shot** is taken from a camera mounted on a crane, giving it the advantage of height and mobility.

A still from the movie, Tokyo Story, shows a young girl kneeling and talking to an elderly couple who sit on tatami mats. The camera is set behind her, close to the floor.

4.34 ***Tokyo Story*** (1953). A camera placed low to the ground presents characters sitting on tatami mats.

A still from the movie, Safety Last, shows a man climbing along the side of a building by using ridges as footholds and handholds. The shot captures the stretch of the city street and its cars.

4.35 ***Safety Last*** (1923). Harold Lloyd's iconic stunt was performed on a rooftop set. The camera height captures the city skyline.

Camera Angles

Film shots are taken from a multitude of angles, from straight on to above or below. These often are correlated with camera height, as demonstrated by the series of shots from Jane Campion's *The Piano* (1993), a film about a mute Scottish woman who travels with her daughter to New Zealand to complete an arranged marriage. **High angles** are shots directed at a downward angle on individuals or a scene **[Figure 4.36]**, and **low angles** are shots from a position lower than its subject **[Figure 4.37]**. In either case, the exact angle of the shot can vary from very steep to slight. An **overhead shot** depicts the action from above, generally looking directly down on the subject from a crane, helicopter, or drone **[Figure 4.38]**. In the Czech film *The Shop on Main Street* (1965), a clever opening crane shot looking down on the town reflects the point of view of a stork nesting on a chimney. Shots vary in terms of horizontal angles as well, with characters' faces more often shown in three-quarter view than in profile or frontally.

A still from the movie, The Piano, shows two people walking on a beach towards a large, glowing shape in the sand that resembles a seahorse. The still is captured from high above.

4.36 ***The Piano*** (1993). A high-angle long shot of the arrival on the beach.

A still from the movie, The Piano, shows a man with an axe walking on a bridge in the countryside. The shot is captured looking up at the side of the bridge, and the frame is canted.

4.37 ***The Piano*** (1993). An extreme low-angle shot, slightly canted, shows the farmer/husband as he furiously descends toward his unfaithful wife.

A still from the movie, The Piano, shows a woman playing a piano. The shot is taken from above and behind the woman, with her hands and full length of the keys visible.

4.38 ***The Piano*** (1993). With this overhead shot, the film depicts a rare moment of contentment and harmony at the piano.

Shots change their angle depending on physical or geographical position or point of view, so that a shot from a tall adult's perspective may be a high-angle shot, whereas a child's view may be seen through low angles. **Point-of-view (POV) shots** reproduce a character's optical point of view, often preceded or followed by shots of the character looking. Such subjective shots might indicate point of view through camera movement or optical effects as well as through camera height and angle. Much of Alfred Hitchcock's *Rear Window* (1954) conveys the point of view of its protagonist, confined to his apartment with a broken leg, through camera angle and distance. Camera angles can sometimes indicate psychological, moral, or political meanings in a film, as when victims are seen from above and oppressors from below, but such interpretations must be made carefully. Formal features like these assume particular meanings in the context of the film's own patterns.

Depth of Field

In addition to the various ways an image can be framed to create perspectives and meanings, shots can be focused to create different layers of depth that subtly shape our understanding. As noted in the history section of this chapter, technological advances in camera lenses played a central role in allowing filmmakers to experiment with depth of field in a variety of ways. One of the most dramatic products of these developments is **deep focus** — a camera technique in which multiple planes in the shot are all in focus simultaneously.

A film about three physically and psychologically brutalized veterans returning home from World War II, William Wyler's *The Best Years of Our Lives* (1946), shot by Gregg Toland, provides superior examples of how deep focus can create relationships within a single image. In one image, the two grown children in the foreground frame the happy reunion of their parents in the background, all in harmonious balance and focus, with just a hint of the theme of isolation that will be developed after the homecoming **[Figure 4.39]**. In another image from the same film **[Figure 4.40]**, shallow focus, in which only a narrow range of the field is focused, is used. Here the choice of a depth of field indicates that what is significant in the image is the embracing lovers. With a **rack focus** (also known as a *pulled focus*), there is a rapid change in focus from one object to another, such as refocusing from the face of a woman to the figure of a man approaching from behind her. The effect can emphasize depth of field or avoid cutting in a dialogue scene. The manipulation of focus also can be used to convey a subjective effect, as when the protagonist of *Still Alice* (2014), a professor at Columbia University suffering from early-onset Alzheimer's disease, becomes disoriented when running on what should be familiar campus terrain **[Figure 4.41]**.

A still from the movie, The Best Years of Our Lives, shows a young woman and man on either side of the foreground, as two people embrace in the center of the background.

4.39 ***The Best Years of Our Lives*** (1946). The deep focus and balanced composition indicate restored family harmony at a soldier's homecoming.

A still from the movie, The Best Years of Our Lives, shows two people embracing. The shot is close up, taken from the chest up.

4.40 ***The Best Years of Our Lives*** (1946). The focused foreground of embracing lovers deemphasizes the veteran's disability.

A still from the movie Still Alice, shows a woman in clear focus against a blurred background.

4.41 ***Still Alice*** (2014). The protagonist's sudden confusion with her surroundings is conveyed through shallow depth of field.

Contrast and Color

Color profoundly affects our experience and understanding of a film shot. Even black-and-white films use contrast and gradations to create atmosphere or emphasize certain motifs. In F. W. Murnau's *Nosferatu* (1922), black and white and tones of gray create an ominous world where evil lives not in darkness but in shading **[Figure 4.42]**. Contemporary use of black and white can evoke a "lo-fi" or improvised aesthetic. In *Frances Ha* (2013), writer-director Noah Baumbach uses a digital version of monochrome to make his New York–set film recall French New Wave films **[Figure 4.43]**. *Computer Chess* (2013) goes so far as to use a vintage black-and-white tube camera to produce the soft look of analog video footage from the early 1980s. *Pleasantville* (1998) was one of the first films to use digital processing to manipulate color in the service of the plot. In it, the world of a black-and-white 1950s television show switches to color as metaphor for the characters' emotional awakening.

A still from the movie, Nosferatu, shows a young man standing before a glaring light, in a room filled with dark shadows and little light.

4.42 ***Nosferatu*** (1922). Diffuse shadows and shades of gray create an atmosphere of dread.

A still from the black-and-white movie, "Frances Ha," shows a young girl smiling widely in the foreground. The background of the still is blurred.

4.43 ***Frances Ha*** (2012). This modest story of young New Yorkers uses black and white to recall both its French New Wave influences and Woody Allen's *Manhattan* (1979).

Color can be described by **hue** (such as yellow or purple, discerned by detecting light of a particular wavelength), **value** (degree of lightness or darkness), and **intensity** (brightness or dullness). Beginning with the locations, set decoration, make-up, and costumes, and enhanced by lighting, gels, and filters, color can be used to sharpen, mute, or balance the effects of the scene during shooting. When used effectively, metallic blues, soft greens, and deep reds can elicit very different emotions from viewers. Cinematographer Bradford Young is known for his striking use of color and composition in films from the independent *Pariah* (2011) **[Figure 4.44]** to the Oscar-nominated *Arrival* (2016). Depending on genre or desired effect, a film may use realistic or unrealistic palettes, create mood through a monochromatic color scheme, or add tension through dramatic oppositions in color.

A still from the movie, Pariah, shows a young African American teenage girl on a bus at night. The still is primarily tinted green and blue, with saturated light on the bus.

4.44 *Pariah* (2011). Cinematographer Bradford Young and director Dee Rees designed their film's color palette to reflect the heroine's search for identity.

Color is a key element in the composition of the image. The spectacular nature of the Technicolor process was used for heightened emotional effect by masters of cinematography like Jack Cardiff in *The Red Shoes* (1948), in which a dancer's experience takes on the vividness of her red shoes. When color ceased to be a novelty, it was used for both realist and expressive purposes. For example, Néstor Almendros filmed Terrence Malick's *Days of Heaven* (1978) at the "magic hour" just before sunset to capture a particular quality of light for the historical setting in the Great Plains. The five sections of Zhang Yimou's martial arts epic *Hero* (2002), shot by Christopher Doyle, are correlated with five different colors to emphasize its prismatic narrative of betrayal.

Choices, from whether to shoot on film or digitally to what type of stock or camera to use, are crucial to creating a film's palette and color effects. For example, digital cameras capture red, green, and blue separately and are much more capable of shooting in low light. (See Chapter 3 for a fuller discussion of lighting as an aspect of mise-en-scène.) Film stock can vary in speed (a measure of a stock's sensitivity to light) and the ways it registers color. Manipulation of exposure and choices in printing called **color timing** also affect the color of a particular film. Cinematographer Rodrigo Prieto used different stocks, cameras, and lenses to achieve the looks of three interconnected stories that span the globe in *Babel* (2006). In digital processing, **color correction** refers to adjusting the accuracy and

consistency of the footage (for example, exposure and white balance) and **color grading** to enhancing the color style of the film.

TECHNOLOGY IN ACTION

Color in Film

The expressive use of color in film has evolved through artistic vision and technical innovation — from hand tinting to Technicolor experiments, faster stocks, and digital processing. Early silent films like *King Lear* (1910) created an impression of color film through its hand-tinted frames **[Figure 4.45a]**, an effect reconstructed in the British Film Institute's preservation. Because of the time and labor involved, this practice never became a widespread phenomenon. Before releasing *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937), Disney introduced the three-strip Technicolor process through a series of vibrant short films like *Flowers and Trees* (1932) **[Figure 4.45b]**. This short, part of the *Silly Symphonies* (1929–1939) series, became a sensation and was followed in 1935 by the first Technicolor feature, *Becky Sharp*.

A still from the restored version of the black-and-white movie, King Lear. The still features several people with pale skin and dressed in bright garments.

4.45a ***King Lear*** (1910). Early films presented in hand-tinted color formats may survive only in black-and-white prints.

A still from the Technicolor animation, Flowers and Trees, depicts a humanoid tree trunk playing a harp made from the bent trunk of an adjacent tree.

4.45b ***Flowers and Trees*** (1932). Disney's Silly Symphonies shorts introduced Technicolor processes that were used in live-action narrative features by the end of the decade.

In 1950, Eastman Kodak introduced a less cumbersome single-strip color process. Marketed under different brands, Eastmancolor would soon displace Technicolor as the industry standard. By 1955, color production finally exceeded black-and-white cinematography. DeLuxe Color and CinemaScope were brand names advertised along with the stars of *The Girl Can't Help It* (1956), a Jayne Mansfield rock-and-roll farce that spoofs advertising culture, to attract audiences to the spectacle of cinema **[Figure 4.45c]**. The movie opens in black and white until an onscreen host reveals its "gorgeous, lifelike color" and pushes back the edges of the image to the full 2.35:1 widescreen ratio.

A still from the movie, The Girl Can't Help It, shows a woman singing on stage with a band playing behind her. The still is in color.

4.45c ***The Girl Can't Help It*** (1956). In the 1950s, new cinema color processes were aggressively marketed, along with widescreen technology, to compete with television's small black-and-white images.

To watch a clip about the use of color in *The Master* (2012), go to LaunchPad for *The Film Experience* at **launchpadworks.com**

The advent of digital technology in the 1990s made possible the saturated visuals of computer-generated imagery (CGI) in animated films like *Up* (2009), as well as the altering of color in postproduction. A color script laid out the movie's moods and tones and guided animators through the transition into bright images when the elderly man, Carl, embarks on his adventure. Yet some filmmakers still favor the depth and richness of recording color on film, as in the 65mm format used to film most of *The Master* (2012) **[Figure 4.45d]**, which preserved more detail and color nuance than either 35mm or digital formats.

A still from the movie, The Master, shows a man breaking coconuts under a canopy on a beach.

4.45d ***The Master*** (2012). Working with cinematographer Mihai Mă laimare Jr. shooting on 65mm film, Paul Thomas Anderson used color to evoke the look of a film shot in the 1960s.

Movement

Examine this clip from *Roma* (2018), and describe the effects of the moving camera. Why is a moving frame used here instead of a series of shots?

A video clip from the movie, Roma, depicts several people on a sidewalk, waiting at a signal.

Movement in movies re-creates a part of the human experience that could be represented only after the advent of film technology. In our daily lives, we anticipate these movements of a shot — for instance, when we focus on a friend sitting at a table and then refocus beyond that friend on another person standing at the door, when we stand still and turn our head from our left shoulder to our right, or when we watch from a moving car as buildings pass. As these adjustments within our field of vision do, the camera can move (by panning, tilting, or tracking) and then refocus (by adjusting the lens to zoom in or out).

Reframing refers to the process of moving the frame from one position to another within a single continuous shot. One extreme and memorable example of reframing occurs in the flashback to the protagonist's childhood in *Citizen Kane* (1941). Here the camera pulls back from the boy in the yard to reframe the shot to include his mother observing him from inside the window. It then continues backward to reframe the mother as she walks past her husband and seats herself at a table next to the banker Thatcher, who will take charge of their son **[Figures 4.46a–4.46c]**. Often such reframings are more subtle, such as when the camera moves slightly upward so that a character who is rising from a chair is kept centered in the frame.

A succession of three stills, labeled (a) through (c), shows a scene from the movie, Citizen Kane.

4.46a–4.46c *Citizen Kane* (1941). The camera movement reframes three planes of the image and four characters to condense a traumatic moment in Kane's lost childhood.

Description
The still (a) shows a young boy, a sled, and a snowman outside with falling snow. The still (b) shows a woman watching the boy of still A play outside in the snow through the window of a house. The still (c) shows the woman seated with a man at a table, looking at papers. A second man stands watching them. The boy from still A can still be seen playing outside through the window in the background.

Pans and Tilts

Pans and tilts are mobile frames in which the camera mount remains stationary. A **pan** (short for *panorama*) is a left or right rotation of the camera whose base remains in a fixed position, producing a horizontal movement onscreen. The camera pivots as if a character is turning his or her head. For example, the long shot that scans the rooftops of San Francisco for a fugitive at the beginning of *Vertigo* (1958) is a pan, as are many similar establishing shots of a skyline. In a **360-degree pan**, the camera completes its rotation, a disorienting effect used by experimental filmmaker Chantal Akerman in her early short *La Chambre* (1972) **[Figure 4.47]**.

Two stills a and b from the movie, La Chambre, shows a woman in her bed. The first still shows the woman in bed, a chair next to her legs. The second still shows a table, and a chest of drawers kept next to her bed.

4.47a and 4.47b *La Chambre* (1972). As the camera completes a 360-degree rotation of the room's interior, the filmmaker disappears screen right and reappears screen left.

Less common, **tilts** are upward or downward rotations of the camera, whose tripod or mount remains in a fixed position, producing a vertical movement onscreen, as when the frame swings upward to re-create the point of view of someone looking at a skyscraper starting at street level and moving upward into the clouds. In Wim Wenders's *Paris, Texas* (1984), a story about a father and son searching for the boy's mother, repeated tilt shots become a rhetorical action, moving the frame up a flagpole with an American flag, along the sides of Houston skyscrapers, and into the sky to view a passing plane. In this case, vertical tilts seem to suggest an ambiguous hope to escape or find comfort from the long quest across Texas.

Tracking Shots

A **tracking shot** is taken by a mounted camera moving through space. It can also be called a **dolly shot** when the camera is moved on a wheeled dolly. Elaborate camera movements can be achieved in this way through intricate planning. Max Ophüls was famous for using lengthy, fluid tracking shots in his films — for example, following a waltzing couple in *The Earrings of Madame de …* (1953). This feature distinguishes the films he made in four different countries over the course of his career. In the remarkable first shot of Jean-Luc Godard's *Contempt* (1963), a camera on tracks moves forward into the foreground of the image, following a woman reading. When it reaches the foreground, the camera turns and aims

its lens directly at us, the audience. When moving camera shots follow an individual or object, they are sometimes called **following shots**. In *The 400 Blows* (1959), a single following shot tracks the boy, Antoine Doinel, for eighty seconds as he runs from the reformatory school to the edge of the sea. Cameras can be raised on cranes, mounted on moving vehicles, or carried in helicopters to follow a movie's action. High-definition, lightweight, and miniaturized digital cameras have greatly expanded mobility. *Kedi* (2016), a documentary about the street cats of Istanbul, uses remotely controlled cameras to travel with the cats near the ground and drones to record their world on the rooftops of the city.

Handheld and Steadicam Shots

Even greater mobility is afforded when the camera is carried by the camera operator. Encouraged first by the introduction of lightweight 16mm cameras and later by video formats, **handheld shots** are often-unsteady film images produced by an individual carrying the camera. They frequently are used in news reporting and documentary cinematography or to create an unsteady frame that suggests the movements of an individual point of view. The Dogme 95 manifesto issued by several Danish filmmakers in 1995 called for updating the language of cinema through the use of handheld cameras, among other "rules" for fostering immediacy in filmmaking. After the first Dogme film, *The Celebration* (1998), the movement spread, with filmmakers outside Denmark intrigued by

the challenge. The restless energy of the fifteen-year-old protagonist of *Fish Tank* (2009) as she faces the limited options of her upbringing and class position are palpably conveyed by the rushing handheld shots **[Figure 4.48]**. In these cases, the handheld point of view involves the audience more immediately and concretely in the action.

A still from a movie, Fish tank, shows a handheld camera, with its screen tilted toward the speaker. The screen shows a woman inside a room.

4.48 ***Fish Tank*** (2009). The film uses a handheld camera to capture the protagonist's frustrated energy and, when she films herself within the film, her isolation.

VIEWING CUE

Go to **launchpadworks.com** to watch a clip from *Fish Tank* (2009). How does the use of a handheld camera contribute to the effect of this clip?

A video clip from the movie, Fish Tank, depicts a woman, two girls, and a man enjoying a picnic by a river.

To achieve the stability of a tripod mount, the fluidity of a tracking shot, and the flexibility of a handheld camera, cinematographers may wear the camera on a special stabilizing mount often referred to by the trademarked name **Steadicam**. In *Goodfellas* (1990), a film about mobster Henry Hill, a famous Steadicam shot, lasting several minutes, twists and turns with Hill and his entourage through a back door, across a kitchen, and into the main room of a nightclub, suggesting the bravura and power of a man who can go anywhere, who is both onstage and backstage **[Figure 4.49]**. In the restaurant scene in *Kill Bill: Vol. 1* (2003), Quentin Tarantino goes even further, incorporating a crane in a virtuoso Steadicam sequence.

A still from the movie Goodfellas, shows a man in a suit leading a woman in a dress through the busy kitchen of a nightclub.

4.49 *Goodfellas* (1990). The long and winding trail of power behind the scenes is depicted in a three-minute Steadicam shot.

Zooms

A zoom occurs not when a camera is moved but when adjustments are made to the camera lens during filming that magnify portions of the image. The kind of compositional reframing and apparent movement that is accomplished with zoom lenses, which employ a variable focal length of 75mm or higher, are different than the kind of movement accomplished by a moving camera used during a tracking shot. For example, Stanley Kubrick's historical film *Barry Lyndon* (1975) uses frequent zooms to move from characters to extreme wide shots, creating a kind of stasis within movement. (During a **zoom-in**, the lens's focal length is changed to narrow the field of view on a distant object, magnifying and reframing it, often in close-up, while the camera remains stationary. Less noticeable in films, a **zoom-out** reverses the action of a zoom-in so that objects that appear close initially are distanced and reframed as small figures.)

VIEWING CUE

Go to **launchpadworks.com** to watch a clip from *Barry Lyndon* (1975), and describe the effect of the zoom. How does it differ from the tracking shot in *Citizen Kane* (1941) discussed in this chapter?

A screenshot of a paused video shows a scene from the movie, Barry Lyndon. The scene shows the profile of a girl standing on a road. A play button is present at the center of the screenshot.

Although camera movements (such as tracking or Steadicam shots) and changes in the lens's focal length (zooms) may serve the same function of bringing the focus of a shot closer or relegating it to the distance, there are perceptible differences in the images. In a zoom-in, the image tends to flatten and lose its depth of field, whereas a tracking shot calls attention to the spatial depth that the camera moves through. They also can vary in their significance. Long lenses were first introduced in photojournalism in the 1940s. The use of the zoom lens in *The Battle of Algiers* (1966) evokes the newsreel technology through which the historical events were initially seen. Sometimes techniques are combined. In *Vertigo* (1958), Hitchcock used a trackin while zooming out to suggest his main character's feeling of vertigo. The effect changes the focus of the image while the image stays the same size.

From Special Effects to Visual Effects

Since the dawn of cinema, filmmakers have employed **special effects** — techniques that enhance a film's realism or surpass assumptions about realism with spectacle. In fact, for Georges Méliès, the foremost illusionist of early cinema, the cinematographic illusion of motion was one of many special effects that included background paintings, smoke and mirrors, and tinted images. **Mechanical effects** (also known as *practical effects*) are produced on set, often with props, costumes, and make-up, and

include pyrotechnics (fires and explosions), weather effects, and scaled models.

The earliest films also used **optical effects** — special effects produced in camera or with an optical printer, including common visual transitions between shots such as dissolves, fade-outs, and wipes, or process shots that combine figures and backgrounds through the use of matte shots. Optical effects also include basic manipulations of the camera, such as **slow motion** (or **fast motion**) — a special effect that makes the action move at slower-than-normal (or faster-than-normal) speeds, achieved by filming the action at a high speed (or slow speed) and then projecting it at standard speeds. Examples of optical effects produced in-camera include **forced perspective**, which is created by positioning the camera to create illusions of scale; **color filters**, which are devices fitted to the camera lens to change the tones of the recorded image; and the **dolly zoom**, the famous effect in Hitchock's *Vertigo* (1958), in which the camera is moved to keep the object the same size.

Another common optical effect is a **process shot** — a special effect that combines two or more images as a single shot. Masks are used to leave part of the film unexposed. A second image is then filmed on that portion of the frame, and the two are combined in the printing or postproduction process. A process shot might be used to add a background to the action onscreen. In **rear projection**, a projected image is positioned behind a screen in front of which the

actors perform; the technique was widely used before computer compositing **[Figure 4.50]**.

A still from the movie, North by Northwest, shows a well-dressed man running in a barren field and being chased by a small plane in flight.

4.50 ***North by Northwest*** (1959). In a famous scene, Hitchcock's protagonist is pursued by a crop-dusting plane. Location shooting in a barren field is intercut with process shots using rear projection for a harrowing effect.

A **matte shot** is a process shot that joins two or more pieces of film — one with the central action or object and the other with a painted or digitally produced background that would be difficult to create physically for the shot. Elaborate matte paintings are used to create atmosphere, background, and a sense of scale in films such as *King Kong* (1933). Traveling mattes are required when a figure moves in the foreground **[Figure 4.51]**.

A still from the movie, War for the Planet of the Apes, shows a realistic chimpanzee in the foreground of a snowy region.

4.51 ***King Kong*** (1933). The jungle matte painting provides a mysterious background for stop-motion animation by Willis O'Brien.

Visual effects (VFX) are special effects created in postproduction through digital imaging. With the advent of computer-generated imagery, the technologies and artistry of cinematography, animation, and visual effects began to overlap more and more. Science fiction, superhero, and action films became more dominant in the market as visual effects made possible images that would be too costly, dangerous, or challenging to film. Some visual effects use a combination of cinematography and computer techniques, such as the celebrated "bullet time" in *The Matrix* (1999), in which images taken by a set of still cameras surrounding a subject are put together to create an effect of suspension or extreme slow motion. In *Inception* (2010), recognizable images of cityscapes and mountain fortresses are remade as the fragile and malleable virtual shapes of a dreamscape through a combination of in-camera effects and CGI **[Figure 4.52]**. The fantasy world of Peter Jackson's *Lord of the Rings* trilogy (2001–2003) was created through a range of special effects that include the use of simple forced perspective (to put hobbit, elven, and human characters in proper scale) and the imaginative work of the New Zealand–based animation studio Weta Digital. The company innovated **performance-capture technology**, generating computer models from data gathered from actor Andy Serkis's physical performance and facial expressions and incorporating them into the character Gollum. Weta and Serkis later collaborated to create Caesar in *Rise of the Planet of the Apes* (2011) and its sequels **[Figure 4.53]**.

A still from the movie, Inception, shows a city scene where the street runs along the roofs of big city buildings, some of which are partially or completely upside down.

4.52 ***Inception*** (2010). Images of real and virtual worlds merge in the production and postproduction process, appropriate to a drama that takes place in the layers of a dream.

A still from the movie, War for the Planet of the Apes, shows a human-sized ape with a strange facial expression.

4.53 ***War for the Planet of the Apes*** (2017). From Gollum in *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy (2001–2003) to Caesar, the leader of the ape rebellion in the rebooted *Planet of the Apes*

franchise (2011–2017), actor Andy Serkis's work spans the history and increasing sophistication of performance capture technology.

The art of cinematography has been irrevocably altered by digital technologies. In addition to spectacular effects, minor adjustments to the image are now made in postproduction. Continuity mistakes can be corrected, wires and rigs used in stunt scenes can be removed, and colors can be enhanced or muted for naturalistic or atmospheric effects.

Thinking about Cinematography

From the desert expanses of *Lawrence of Arabia* (1962) to the dreamscapes of *Inception* (2010), movie images have been valued for their beauty, realism, or ability to inspire wonder. Often these qualities are found in their production values. But film images carry other values in what they preserve and say about the world. French filmmaker Jean-Luc Godard's remark that film is truth twenty-four frames per second is one way to describe the power and importance of the film image. Yet as Godard's many films themselves demonstrate, this "truth" is not just the truth of presentation but also the truth of representation. In short, film images are prized both for their accuracy in showing or presenting us with facts and for the ways they interpret or represent them.

Images hold a remarkable power to capture a moment. Flipping through a photo album provides glimpses of past events. The morning newspaper collapses a day of war into a single poignant image. However, images can do far more than preserve the facts of a moment. They also can interpret those facts in ways that give them new meanings. A painting by Norman Rockwell evokes feelings of warmth and nostalgia, while the stained-glass windows lining a cathedral aim to draw our spiritual passions. When motion is added, the power of images to show and interpret information magnifies exponentially. A film image may be designed both to present — to

show the visual truth of the subject matter realistically and reliably — and to represent — to color that truth with shades of meaning.

The Image as Presentation and Representation

The *image as presentation* reflects our belief that film communicates the details of the world realistically, even while showing us unrealistic situations. We prize the stunning images of the forbidding mountain in *Everest* (2015) **[Figure 4.54]** and the dynamic close-ups of a boxing match in *Creed II* (2018) for their authenticity in depicting realities or perspectives. In pursuing this goal, cinematography may document either subjective images (which reflect the points of view of a person experiencing the events) or objective images (which assume a more general accuracy or truth). In *Little Big Man* (1970), images from the perspective of a 101-year-old pioneer raised by Native Americans succeed in both ways. They become remarkably convincing displays of known historical characters and events — such as General George Custer at the Battle of Little Bighorn — and they poignantly re-create the perspective of the pioneer as he lived through and now remembers those events.

A still from the movie, Everest, shows several people pitching tents together in the snowy mountains.

4.54 *Everest* (2015). Location shooting at base camp in Nepal rendered in IMAX 3-D presents viewers with evidence of nature's might.

The image also can influence or even determine the meaning of the events or people it portrays by *re*-presenting reality through the interpretive power of cinematography. The *image as representation* is an exercise in the power of visual stimuli. The way in which we depict individuals or actions implies a kind of control over them, knowledge of them, or power to determine what they mean. When we frame a subject, we capture and contain that subject within a particular point of view that gives it definition beyond its literal meaning. This desire to represent through control over an image permeates the drama of *Vertigo* (1958) — in which the main character, Scottie, tries desperately to define the woman he was hired to follow, Madeleine, through appearances — and the cinematography aids him by framing her as a painting. Representation as power over images can be found at the heart of films as diverse as *Blonde Venus* (1932) and *Pan's Labyrinth* (2006), which in different ways show the ability of the film image to capture and manipulate a person or reality in the service of a point of view. In *Blonde Venus*, as in many of the films directed by Josef von Sternberg and starring Marlene Dietrich, the heroine is depicted as a self-consciously erotic figure, whether in an outrageous costume as a showgirl or as a housewife and mother at home. In *Pan's Labyrinth*, a young girl escapes from the frightening reality of her father's brutality during the Spanish Civil War into a fantasy world rendered real for the spectator through artful cinematography and special effects **[Figure 4.55]**.

A still from the movie, Pan’s Labyrinth, A lonely child’s fantasy world is represented as real to the viewer

4.55 ***Pan’s Labyrinth*** (2006). A lonely child’s fantasy world is represented as real to the viewer.

VIEWING CUE

Go to **launchpadworks.com** to watch a clip from *Vertigo* (1958) and contrast a shot that presents an objective situation with one or more shots that seem to represent Scottie's particular reality.

A screenshot of a paused video shows a scene from the movie, Vertigo. The scene shows a man peeking through a door near a woman in a building. A play button is present at the center of the screenshot.

Part of the art of film is that these two primary imagistic values — presentation and representation — are interconnected and can be mobilized in intricate and ambiguous ways in a movie. When Harry Potter speaks in the language of snakes in *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets* (2002), the cinematography highlights the fear and confusion among Harry's classmates. Is the image an objective presentation of the perspective of the Hogwarts students, or is it an interpretive representation on the part of the film itself, trying to make the viewer think Harry is deserving of fear? A perceptive viewer must consider the most appropriate meanings for the shot — whether it reflects the students' position or the film's position. Watching closely how images carry and mobilize values, we encounter the complexity of making meaning in a film and the importance of our own activity as viewers.

Traditions of Images

Our encounters with the values embedded in the images we experience shape our expectations of subsequent films. For some kinds of movies, like documentaries and historical fiction films, we have learned to see the film frame as a window on the world and seek accuracy in its images. For others, such as avant-garde or art films, we learn to approach the images as puzzles, perhaps revealing secrets of life and society. Here we designate two conventions in the history of the film image — the convention of image as *presence* and

the convention of image as *text*. In the first case, we identify with the image; in the second, we read it.

The Image as Presence

The compositional practices of the film image that we call the *conventions of presence* imply a close identification with the image's point of view, a primarily emotional response to that image, and an experience of the image as if it were a lived reality. Images in this tradition are able to fascinate us with a visual activity we participate in, overwhelm us with their beauty or horror, or comfort us with their familiarity. Although not entirely separable from the story and other elements of the film form, imagistic presence can be seen as what principally entertains us at the movies, what elicits our tears and shrieks. A shot of horses and riders dashing toward a finish line or of a woman embracing a dear friend communicates an immediacy or truth that engages us and leads us through subsequent images. A film image that approximates the way we experience the physical world, like a shot that re-creates the dizzying perspectives from a mountaintop, emphasizes the phenomenological process of being present in the same time and space as the image. A film image that reflects a state of mind or emotion relies on the presence of the image as a psychological process. For example, in *Midnight Cowboy* (1969), disorienting, blurry images at a party re-create Joe's mental and perceptual experience after taking drugs **[Figure 4.56]**.

A still from the movie, Midnight Cowboy, shows a man's face surrounded by bright colors and bubbles.

4.56 ***Midnight Cowboy*** (1969). Special effects and blurred, colored contrasts create a psychological representation of the cowboy's drug experience.

The Image as Textuality

The word *textuality* refers to properties of the film image that demand emotional and analytical distancing from the image, which is experienced as artifice or a construction to be interpreted. We stand back to look at textual images from an intellectual distance, and they seem loaded with signs and symbols for us to decipher. They impress us more for *how* they show the world than for *what* they show. So-called difficult, abstract, or experimental films — from Germaine Dulac's surrealist film *The Seashell and the Clergyman* (1928) to *A Ghost Story* (2017) — enlist viewers in this way, but many films integrate images that test our abilities to read and decipher. A canted framing of an isolated house or a family reunion shot through a yellow filter may stand out in an otherwise realistic movie as a puzzle image that asks for more reflection: How do we read this image? Why is this unusual composition included? In *The Seashell and the Clergyman* (1928), apparently about a priest in love with a beautiful woman, images resemble the cryptic language of a strange dream, requiring viewers to struggle to decipher them as a way of understanding the film's complex drama of repression and desire **[Figure 4.57]**.

A still from the movie, The Seashell and the Clergyman, shows a man in dark, priest robes crawling on a brick pavement. The shot is captured in very bright light.

4.57 ***The Seashell and the Clergyman*** (1928). Extreme angles, shadows, and highlighted patterns in the pavement suggest a complex dream image in this surrealist collaboration between playwright Antonin Artaud and Germaine Dulac.

Recognizing the dominance of images either of presence or of textuality within a film is one way to begin to appreciate and understand it. A romance like *Eat Pray Love* (2010) exudes the presence of location shooting in Italy, India, and Bali and invites audiences to share the heroine's emotional adventure through its exotic locales. A more dense and complex film about an underground gang of Nazi "werewolves," Lars von Trier's *Zentropa* (1991) asks us to decipher images constructed with special effects and mixed media, and part of its success lies in how it engages the complexities of a tradition of textuality.

We experience and process — and enjoy — film images by recognizing the concepts and contexts that underpin them and our expectations of them. The initial hostile reception of *Bonnie and Clyde* in 1967, for instance, turned to admiration several months later. One way of understanding the dynamics of this change is to note that viewers realized that the film's images belong not to a tradition of presence but to a tradition of textuality. Many viewers initially may have seen the film as glamorizing 1930s violence and only later recognized the distance of those images as an ironic commentary on 1960s violence. Film, like chance, favors the prepared mind.

FILM IN FOCUS Recreating History in *Once Upon a Time … in Hollywood* (2019)

See also: *Velvet Goldmine* (1998); *Computer Chess* (2013); *The Hateful Eight* (2015)

To watch a clip from *Once Upon a Time … in Hollywood* (2019), go to LaunchPad for *The Film Experience* at **launchpadworks.com**

Quentin Tarantino's homage to the waning years of studio-era Hollywood is set in a Southern California bathed in golden sunlight. But anyone familiar with Tarantino will expect the color red to be part of the film's palette; eventually there will be blood. The film revisits one of the most grisly episodes of the late 1960s, when five people, including actress Sharon Tate, were murdered in Benedict Canyon by followers of the cult leader Charles Manson. The title's "once upon a time" is a clue that this is a fictionalized version of events, and indeed Tarantino reimagines the outcome so the "good guys" win. "Once upon a time" signifies this movie-loving director's homage to the way things used to be done in Hollywood, both the town itself and the global cultural empire. Cinematography is perhaps the film's greatest tool in this project.

Robert Richardson, director of photography on six of Tarantino's movies, shares the director's passion for celluloid. While their films together are set in different times and places, from Nazi-occupied France (*Inglourious Basterds*, 2009) to 1870s Wyoming (*The Hateful Eight*, 2015), Richardson has consistently used cameras, lenses, lighting set-ups, and film stocks that are either vintage or made to look that way. His saturated colors, true blacks, controlled camera movements, and precise lens adjustments produce complete cinematic worlds, inhabited by larger-than-life characters who may themselves be considered artifacts of times past. The

violence and bloodshed that occur in these worlds are both amplified and excused. It's all just moviemaking, the viewer is assured, as full of mayhem as a vintage cartoon. Richardson's artistry immerses the viewer, to thrilling and often disturbing effect.

Once Upon a Time … in Hollywood, with its setting in the world of filmmaking, opens new vistas for Tarantino and Richardson's collaboration. Their protagonist, Rick Dalton (Leonardo DiCaprio), made his reputation in the quintessential Hollywood genre: the western. In keeping with that genre's grandeur, the studio backlots and streets of Los Angeles are beautifully captured on Kodak 35mm color stocks. DiCaprio and his stunt double, driver, and buddy Cliff Booth (Brad Pitt) have the unreal skin tones of classic movie stars **[Figure 4.58]**. Richardson uses a range of anamorphic lenses to give the widescreen images an unmistakable cinematic look and zooms to evoke the restless camerawork of the 1960s. Dailies were printed of each day's shoot for review, a return to older on-set practices. *Once Upon a Time … in Hollywood* shows off the big-screen attractions that aimed to entice suburban audiences back to cinema after the advent of television.

A still from the movie, Once Upon a Time in Hollywood, shows a man standing at the flat tire of a car on a forest road. The shot is very saturated in color and tinted yellow.

4.58 ***Once Upon a Time … in Hollywood*** (2019). Saturated colors give the film's stars a larger-than-life quality.

But Tarantino and his team also revel in the textures and formats of the 1950s and ’60s television westerns in which Dalton originally made his name. Episodes of Dalton’s fictional hit TV series *Bounty Law* are shot on an Eastman black-and-white 16mm stock **[Figure 4.59]**. Green-screen footage of DiCaprio is inserted into an actual clip from *The FBI* (a show that aired from 1965 to 1974) and into *The Great Escape* (1963), replacing star Steve McQueen. When Dalton guest-stars as a villain on *Lancer*, the classic series (1968–1970) is perfectly reconstructed. Complementing these shows-and films-within-the-film, brief sequences were shot on nostalgia-infused 16mm and Super-8 Ektachrome. Does the screen image reflect reality or confer it?

A still from the movie, Once Upon a Time in Hollywood, shows a black-and-white vintage image of cowboy in the foreground. Over him the text reads, “Starring, Rick Dalton.”

4.59 ***Once Upon a Time … in Hollywood*** (2019). Robert Richardson used Eastman black-and-white 16mm stock to create a vintage look for Rick Dalton’s fictional TV series *Bounty Law.*

This loving attention to the look of Dalton's imagined filmography implies that the values of his world are also in need of preservation. By 1969, when the film is set, the number of American homes with televisions had grown to 44 million from less than one million in 1949. While the TV western remained a programming staple, its fantasy heroism was now juxtaposed with televised news images of the realities of war in Vietnam. Why are rugged individualists Dalton and Booth bumming around Southern California? Dalton's only real career option — moving to Italy to star in spaghetti westerns (Italian westerns that copy and embellish the Hollywood genre formula even as Hollywood itself is fading) — suggests that the masculine ideal he strives to embody only exists onscreen. The title's echo of the Sergio Leone classic *Once Upon a Time in the West* (1968) evokes both the vanished American frontier and the mythical years of the Hollywood western.

Tarantino also explores questions about masculinity and authenticity through the figure of the stunt double. Once upon a time, Booth actually performed the dangerous actions that Dalton merely feigned. Now, in diminished circumstances — he lives in a trailer with his pit bull — he drives around town wearing sunglasses and bright yellow shirts that match his golden tan and blond hair, looking as cool as a cowboy on horseback. Unlike Dalton, he holds his liquor. Booth connects the world of moviemaking with real-world violence. His wanderings lead him to the hideout of the Manson "family" cult at a dilapidated ranch where B-movie westerns were once shot. Ultimately, the film endorses Booth's physical brutality as heroism, as he changes the course of history. Evoking the "bromance" of classic films like *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* (George Roy Hill, 1969), Tarantino's Hollywood is both familiar and frightening.

Once Upon a Time … in Hollywood's meticulous attention to filmmaking formats directs attention to the actual labor and technology that underpin screen culture. Spotting the title of a film in which she appears on a movie marquee **[Figure 4.60]**, Sharon Tate (Margot Robbie) stops in for the show. Safe inside the cinema, she takes in the grandeur of the big-screen image. This counter-historical fantasy is

served by the film’s commitment to celluloid, both in the filmmaking process and in the select theaters exhibiting the film on 35mm.

A still from the movie, Once Upon a Time in Hollywood, shows a woman posing beside a poster of a film titled, The Wrecking Crew.

4.60 ***Once Upon a Time … in Hollywood*** (2019). Sharon Tate (Margot Robbie) poses with a poster advertising one of her films; the actress lives on in Tarantino's Hollywood fable.

Chapter 4 Review

SUMMARY

- The filming of images is called **cinematography**, which means motion-picture photography or, literally, "writing in movement."
- The history of cinematography is marked by continually changing technology.
  - Thomas Edison's Kinetoscope displayed moving images photographed on Eastman Kodak's flexible celluloid **film stock**. Early film stock was made from highly flammable **nitrate**, later replaced with acetate-based **safety film**.
  - Early black-and-white movies were often colored through tinting or toning processes before the eventual development of two-strip and three-strip **Technicolor** in the 1930s and later color processes in the 1950s and beyond.
  - The development of different **camera lenses** allowed cinematographers to use different **focal lengths** — the distance from the center of the lens to the point where light rays meet in sharp focus — to alter the perspective of an image.
    - **Wide-angle lenses** have a short focal length, **telephoto lenses** have a long one, and a **zoom lens** is a variable focus lens.

- Later technological developments included:
    - lightweight **handheld cameras**, widely used from World War II on;
    - **widescreen processes** and 3-D technology in the 1950s;
    - the **Steadicam** in the 1970s;
    - **computer-generated imagery (CGI)** introduced in the 1970s;
    - **digital cinematography** in the 1990s; and
    - advances in 3-D cinema and virtual reality (VR) in the 2000s.
- The most basic unit of cinematography is the **shot** — a continuously exposed piece of film or continuous digitally captured image without cuts.
    - Each shot orchestrates four important attributes: **framing, depth of field** , color, and movement.
    - **Point of view** is the position from which a person, an event, or an object is seen or filmed.
    - The **aspect ratio** is the relation of width to height of the film frame as it appears on a screen or monitor.
    - **Onscreen space** refers to the space visible within the frame. **Offscreen space** is the implied space or world outside the film's frame.
    - The **scale** of the shot is the distance between the camera and the shot subject. Scale is described by a variety of terms, including **extreme close-ups, close-ups, medium close-ups, medium shots, medium long shots, long shots** , and **extreme long shots**.

    - A **deep-focus** shot is one in which multiple focal planes — foreground, middle ground, and background — are all in sharp focus.
  - Film shots are positioned according to several angles, from straight on to above or below.
    - **High angles** present a point of view from above. **Low angles** present a point of view from below.
- A film camera can be moved in numerous ways to create different visual impressions.
  - While on a stationary tripod, a camera can **pan** or **tilt** to provide horizontal or vertical movement, respectively.
  - **Reframing** refers to the movement of the frame from one position to another within a single continuous shot.
  - A **tracking shot** changes the position of the point of view by moving the camera forward, backward, or around the subject.
  - A **handheld shot** allows freedom of movement that may result in a shaky image.
  - Moving cameras can be stabilized through equipment like a **Steadicam**.
- **Special effects** include explosions and illusions, **optical effects** (**slow motion**, **fast motion**, **process shots**, **matte shots**) and **visual effects** produced digitally (computer-generated imagery (CGI), **performance-capture technology**).
- A film image has two primary values: *presentation* as a true record of the world, and *representation* as an interpretation of reality.

- Two traditions of compositional practice for the film image are *presence*, in which the audience encounters the image directly, and *textuality*, in which the audience engages intellectually with the image.

KEY TERMS

cinematography
apparent motion
magic lantern
chronophotography
film stock
nitrate
safety film
film gauge
panchromatic stock
Technicolor
camera lens
focal length
telephoto lens
zoom lens
depth of field
wide-angle lens
handheld camera
widescreen processes
aspect ratio
anamorphic lens
filter

flare
zooming
camera movement
IMAX
analog video
digital cinematography
computer-generated imagery (CGI)
4K resolution
digital intermediate (DI)
digital cinema package (DCP)
shot
cut
take
master shot
coverage
point of view
subjective point of view
objective point of view
framing
mobile frame
canted frame
academy ratio
widescreen ratio
pan-and-scan process
letterbox
native aspect ratio
mask
iris

onscreen space
offscreen space
rule of thirds
lead room
scale
close-up
extreme close-up
long shot
extreme long shot
medium shot
medium long shot
medium close-up
camera height
crane shot
high angle
low angle
overhead shot
point-of-view (POV) shot
deep focus
rack focus
hue
value
intensity
color timing
color correction
color grading
reframing
pan

360-degree pan
tilt
tracking shot
dolly shot
following shot
handheld shot
Steadicam
zoom-in
zoom-out
special effects
mechanical effects
optical effects
slow motion
fast motion
forced perspective
color filter
dolly zoom
process shot
rear projection
matte shot
visual effects (VFX)
performance-capture technology

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CHAPTER 5 EDITING
Relating Images

The chapter opener shows three still from the movie, Bohemian Rhapsody.

Description

The stills are arranged in the top to the bottom layout. The first still captures a music band, comprising of three members, midst their performance on the stage. The front man stands, in the foreground, stands with legs apart, clutching the microphone tripod with his left hand, and the other raised up to the sky. The other two members of the band, stand behind holding a guitar each. Bright red and yellow stage lights fill the stage from behind them. The second still shows three men talking beside their car parked outdoors on the roadside; the man in the middle holds a pen and paper. The third still shows the lead protagonist playing the piano and singing in a room.

Winner of the Academy Award for Best Film Editing in 2019 and edited by John Ottman, *Bohemian Rhapsody* (2018) is a relatively fast-and-loose biopic about Freddie Mercury and the rock band Queen, covering the rise of the band from 1970 to the death of Mercury from AIDS-related pneumonia in 1991. Punctuated with live performances and recording sessions (and featuring hit songs such as the six-minute “Bohemian Rhapsody” and “We Will Rock You”), the film’s editing moves at a breathtaking pace, with many sequences cut with an average shot length of around two seconds. This rapid editing reflects both the powerful energy of the band and its exuberant performances and also the underlying anxiety and tension that describe the characters and their emotionally and physically fraught rise to stardom.

For some viewers, the velocity of the editing, which moves quickly between different characters and scenes, is worthy of the awards it received, including the Oscar for Best Film Editing. For other viewers, the editing style is a key problem and failure of the film, as it consistently

violates classical editing rules. For example, several sequences lack establishing shots, which are commonly used in Hollywood to show where scenes take place. In other scenes, unmotivated cuts and eye-line mismatches arguably do not support the focus of the dialogue, and the rapid editing does not reflect calmer or quieter moments in the story. Whether you believe it is a stylistic accomplishment in subverting classical editing style or a stylistic fault that creates visual incoherence, the editing of *Bohemian Rhapsody* is a central part of our experience of the film.

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Film **editing** is the process of selecting and joining film footage and shots. As we move through the world, we may witness images that are juxtaposed and overlapped in store windows, on highway billboards, on our desktop computers, or on television when we channel surf. But editing offers a departure from the way we normally see the world. In our everyday experience, discrete images are unified by our singular position and consciousness. And unless we consciously or externally interrupt our vision (such as when we blink), we do not see the world as separate images linked in selected patterns. There are no such limits in editing. Editing may emulate our ordinary ways of seeing or transcend them. The power and art of film editing lie in the ways in which the hundreds or thousands of discrete images that make up a film can be shaped to make sense or

to have an emotional or a visceral impact. Many film theorists and professionals consider editing to be the most unique dimension of the film experience. This chapter explores in depth how film connects separate images to create or reflect key patterns through which viewers see and think about the world.

KEY OBJECTIVES

- Understand the artistic and technological evolution of editing.
- Examine the ways editing constructs different spatial and temporal relationships among images.
- Detail the dominant style of continuity editing.
- Identify the ways in which graphic or rhythmic patterns are created by editing.
- Discuss the ways editing organizes images as meaningful scenes and sequences.
- Summarize how editing strategies engage filmic traditions of continuity or disjuncture.

A Short History of Film Editing

Long before the development of film technology, different images were linked sequentially to tell stories. Ancient Assyrian reliefs show the different phases of a lion hunt, and the 230-foot-long Bayeux tapestry chronicles the 1066 Norman conquest of England in invaluable historical detail. In the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, comic strips and manga have continued this tradition in graphic art: each panel presents a moment of action in the story **[Figures 5.1a–5.1c]**. In cinema, a **storyboard** is a shot-by-shot representation of how a film or a film sequence will unfold.

A photo of an ancient engraving, a photo of an ancient tapestry, and a comic strip sequentially labeled (a), (b), and (c), depict storytelling.

5.1a–5.1c Telling stories through images. Different images linked sequentially — **(a)** ancient Assyrian reliefs, **(b)** the eleventh-century Bayeux tapestry, **(c)** and comics — can resemble storyboards in cinema.

Description
The engraving (a) shows three men carrying supplies. (b) shows a scene from the eleventh-century Bayeux tapestry, depicting action in a war fought on horses and awards. The comic strip labeled (c) has five panels - the dialogues read in Cantonese.

Juxtaposed images that tell stories also have been used symbolically, sensationally, and educationally. Religious triptychs convey spiritual ideas via three connected images. The magic lantern was used by showmen to project successive images and create illusions of the supernatural. By the late nineteenth century, illustrated lectures using photographic slides became popular. Such practices have influenced film editing's evolution into its modern form.

1895–1918: Early Cinema and the Emergence of Editing

Films quickly evolved from showing characters or objects moving within a single image to connecting different images. Magician and early filmmaker Georges Méliès at first used stop-motion photography and, later, editing to create delightful tricks, like the rocket striking the moon in *Trip to the Moon* (1902) **[Figures 5.2a and 5.2b]**. In these early films appear the first creative uses of the edited **cut** — the transition between two separate shots or scenes. Although basic editing techniques were introduced by other filmmakers,

Edwin S. Porter, a prolific employee of Thomas Edison, synthesized these techniques in the service of storytelling in *Life of an American Fireman* (1903) and other early films. One of the most important films in the historical development of cinema, Porter's *The Great Train Robbery* (1903) tells its story in fourteen separate shots, including a famous final shot of a bandit shooting his gun directly into the camera **[Figure 5.3]**. By 1906, the period now known as "early cinema" gave way to cinema dominated by narrative, a transition facilitated by more codified practices of editing.

Two stills from the movie, Trip to the Moon (1992), labeled (a) and (b).

5.2a and 5.2b ***Trip to the Moon*** (1902). In a famous shock cut in his ambitious early science fiction film, Georges Méliès linked the launch of a rocket to its landing on the face of the moon.

Description

The still (a) shows a personified full moon, in the night sky, with a smiling face. The still (b) shows a personified full moon with a rock plunged into its right eye; its expression now depicts pain.

A still from the movie, The Great Train Robbery (1903), shows a man pointing a gun. He has a hat on his head and a scarf around the neck.

5.3 ***The Great Train Robbery*** (1903). Edwin S. Porter is credited with advancing the narrative language of editing in this and other early films. The film's last cut is used to enhance the shock effect of the final image rather than to complete the narrative.

D. W. Griffith, who began making films in 1908, is a towering figure in the development of the classical Hollywood editing style. Griffith is closely associated with the use of **crosscutting** (also called **parallel editing**) — an editing technique that cuts back and forth between actions in separate locations, often implying simultaneity — which he used in the rescue sequences that conclude dozens of his films. In *The Lonely Villa* (1909), shots of female family members isolated in a house alternate with shots of villains trying to break in and then with shots of the father rushing to rescue his family. The infamous climax of Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) uses crosscutting to portray the film's white characters as victims of Reconstruction and the Ku Klux Klan as heroes. Griffith cuts from black soldiers breaking into a white family's isolated cottage to a mixed-race politician threatening a white woman with rape, to the Ku Klux Klan riding to the rescue of both **[Figures 5.4a–5.4c]**. The controversial merging of technique and ideology exemplified in Griffith's craft is a strong demonstration of the power of editing. After the success of Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation*, feature filmmaking became the norm, and Hollywood developed the classical editing style that remains the basis for many films today.

A sequence of three stills from the movie, The Birth of a Nation (1915).The stills are labeled (a), (b), and (c).

5.4a–5.4c ***The Birth of a Nation*** (1915). In this sequence of images, Griffith's white supremacist views are advanced by the use of parallel editing, which encourages the viewer to root for the Ku Klux Klan to arrive in time to rescue the white people being threatened in

two different locations. The last-minute rescue is a synthesis of the intercutting among different spaces.

Description
Still (a) shows a white man hitting a black man. Still (b) shows a black man and a white woman involved in an argument inside a room. Still (c) shows several members of the Ku Klux Klan speeding on horses.

1919–1929: Soviet Montage

Less than a decade after *The Birth of a Nation* and in the wake of the 1917 Russian Revolution, Soviet filmmaker Sergei Eisenstein's first film, *Strike* (1925), influenced the craft of editing in a different, although equally dramatic fashion. Eisenstein's films and writings center on the concept of **montage** (the French word for *editing*): editing that maximizes the effect of the juxtaposition of disparate shots. Eisenstein and his fellow Soviet filmmakers Lev Kuleshov, Vsevolod Pudovkin, and Dziga Vertov advanced montage as the key component of modernist, politically engaged filmmaking.

Eisenstein advocated **dialectical montage**, also called *intellectual montage* — a dramatic form of **intercutting** conflicting or unrelated images to generate an idea or emotion in the viewer. He argued that two contrasting or otherwise conflicting shots will be synthesized into a visual concept when juxtaposed. For example, in *Battleship*

Potemkin (1925), the shots of several stone lions juxtaposed in sequence suggest that one stone lion is leaping to life **[Figures 5.5a–5.5c]**. According to Eisenstein, the concept of awakening, connected to revolutionary consciousness, is thus formed in viewers' minds even as they react viscerally to the lion's leap. Such an association of aesthetic fragmentation with a political program of analysis and action has persisted in many uses of disjunctive editing.

Three still from the movie, Battleship Potemkin (1925), shows the lion sequence. The stills are labeled (a), (b), and (c).

5.5a–5.5c *Battleship Potemkin* (1925). Sergei Eisenstein rouses stone lions through montage.

Description

Still (a) shows a statue of a lion sleeping on its paws. Still (b) shows the lion half awake and keenly looking at a distance. Still (c) shows the lion in a sitting posture.

HISTORY CLOSE UP

Women in the Editing Room

A black-and-white photo shows a woman working in the film editing room.

In the first decades of the twentieth century, women looking for new opportunities during a period of rapid urbanization were attracted to the wide-open field of

filmmaking. They found work as actors and also as writers, editors, producers, and directors. Dorothy Arzner, the most prominent female filmmaker of this era, worked on silent films as a script supervisor, then as a cutter, and finally as the main editor. Editing involves piecing together little bits of film with patience and refinement of movement. These qualities were associated with work traditionally performed by women, such as sewing, telegraph operating, and typing, which made editing one of the few filmmaking fields that remained open to women. Arzner's editing of such epics as *Blood and Sand* (1922) and *The Covered Wagon* (1923) impressed executives at Paramount, where she became a director. Before her 1943 retirement, she made a dozen feature films, many of which employed women editors such as Blanche Sewell.

One of the most exciting onscreen descriptions of the filmmaking process, the Soviet silent film *Man with the Movie Camera* (1929), features a woman at an editing table almost as prominently as the eponymous cameraman. Elizaveta Svilova (shown above in a frame from the film) appears seated at a flatbed, selecting and splicing strips of film, with the mechanical parts of the spinning reels of film linked in montage to the parts of a sewing machine. A close-up of a strip of images showing a child's face suddenly comes to life, a magical transformation that confirms the editor's art. The technique of montage, so central to Soviet cinema, is indebted to women like Svilova and Esfir Shub, whose film *The Fall of the Romanov Dynasty* (1927) innovated the genre of compilation documentary.

Despite these prominent examples in two different traditions, women editors do not have the reputations and opportunities they might have. The very invisibility that editing strives for echoes other forms of women's work that are effaced and unrecognized. Only 23 percent of the top 250 films produced in 2019 employed women on their editing teams, yet even these figures are slightly higher than women's participation in key creative roles on these films overall. Behind these numbers is an important legacy.

1930–1959: Continuity Editing in the Hollywood Studio Era

With the full development of the Hollywood studio system, the movies refined the storytelling style known as **continuity editing**, which gives the viewer the impression that the action unfolds with spatiotemporal consistency. The introduction of synchronous sound posed new challenges, but by the early 1930s editors integrated picture and sound editing into the studio style.

Beginning in the 1940s, cinematic realism achieved new emphasis as one of the primary aesthetic principles in film editing. The influence of Italian neorealism, which used fewer cuts to capture the integrity of stories of ordinary people and actual locations, was evident in other new wave cinemas and even extended to classical Hollywood. For example, Nicholas Ray's *In a Lonely Place* (1950) emphasized imagistic depth and longer takes, cutting less frequently between images **[Figure 5.6]**. Incorporating these variations, the continuity editing style remained dominant at least until the decline at the end of the 1950s of the studio system, whose stable personnel, business models, and genre forms lent consistency to its products and techniques. In many ways, its principles still govern storytelling in film and television, even as the pace of that continuity editing has rapidly increased in recent films such as *Avengers: Endgame* (2019) **[Figure 5.7]**.

A still from the movie, In a Lonely Place (1950), shows the female protagonist along with two men.

5.6 ***In a Lonely Place*** (1950). Postwar cinema tended to explore the depth of images, cutting less frequently between them to achieve a heightened realism.

Description

The scene shows a person's hand holding up the protagonist’s as she looks straight at the person. The older man besides the lady anguishes the act.

A still from the movie, Avengers: Endgame (2019), shows Tony Stark, A K A the Iron Man, standing wounded. A huge pile of debris lays beside burning.

5.7 ***Avengers: Endgame*** (2019). The heritage of continuity editing has remained alive and well into the twenty-first century, although its pace has intensified, particularly in action

films and comic book adaptations. Here, the fourth *Avengers* film breaks from a fast pace to capture an image of Robert Downey Jr. as Iron Man.

1960–1989: Modern Editing Styles

Political and artistic changes starting in the 1960s affected almost every dimension of film form, and editing was no exception. Both in the United States and abroad, alternative editing styles emerged that aimed to fracture classical editing's illusion of realism. Anticipated to some extent by Soviet montage, these new more disjunctive styles reflected the feeling of disconnection of the modern world. Editing visibly disrupted continuity by creating ruptures in the story, radically condensing or expanding time, or confusing the relationships among past, present, and future.

The French New Wave produced some of the first and most dramatic examples of modern styles of editing. Jean-Luc Godard's *Breathless* (1960) innovated the use of **jump cuts**, edits that intentionally create gaps in the action **[Figures 5.8a and 5.8b]**. In the 1960s and 1970s, American filmmakers like Arthur Penn and Francis Ford Coppola incorporated such styles within classical genres to contribute to the New Hollywood aesthetic. In the 1980s, the fast-paced editing style used in commercials and music videos began to appear in mainstream films. Tony Scott's *Top Gun* (1986), about fighter pilots competing in flight school, is indicative of this period; Scott was

known for directing commercials before bringing his frenetic style to feature films.

Two stills from the movie, Breathless (1960), labeled (a) and (b).

5.8a and 5.8b *Breathless* (1960). Jump cuts between or in the middle of shots are a visual vehicle for conveying the distractions and disjunctions in a petty criminal's life. Michel's voiceover continues as we see Patricia from different angles.

Description
The stills shows two different angles of the female protagonist seated in the passenger's seat of a car in traffic.

1990s–Present: Editing in the Digital Age

Nonlinear digital editing ushered in perhaps the most significant changes in the history of film editing. Whereas for decades editors cut actual film footage by hand on a Moviola or flatbed editing table or in linear sequence on tape, in the 1990s editors began to use computer-based nonlinear digital editing systems. In nonlinear editing, film footage is stored as digital information on high-capacity computer hard drives. Individual takes can be organized easily and accessed instantaneously, sound-editing options can be explored simultaneously with picture editing, and optical effects such as dissolves and fades can be immediately visualized on the computer rather than added much later in the printing process. Feature films were soon edited with nonlinear computer-based systems regardless of whether they were shot on 35mm film or digital video.

The more rapid pace of contemporary films seems to correlate with digital editing. Average shot length has declined significantly, with shots in *Transformers: Age of Extinction* (2014) averaging around three

seconds, compared with the ten-second shots measured by scholars in *The Grapes of Wrath* (1940). However, digital filmmaking also can embrace the opposite aesthetic effect. On film, the length of a single take was limited by how much stock the camera could hold; on video, the duration of a shot is virtually limitless. Filmmaker Aleksandr Sokurov's *Russian Ark* (2002) is a virtuoso feature-length film with no cuts at all **[Figure 5.9]**. Still other contemporary films use fast-paced editing to innovative effect. For example, *Baby Driver* (2017) combines an upbeat pop soundtrack with flashy, rapid editing to tell the story of its protagonist, who skillfully drives getaway cars for a bank **[Figures 5.10a and 5.10b]**.

A still from the movie, Russian Ark (2002), shows an ongoing event, with people performing both on the stage and in the orchestra pit of a theater.

5.9 ***Russian Ark*** (2002). Wandering through the Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg and seeming to pass through historical eras, the digital camera is the vehicle for this film's meditation on art, politics, and Russian history, conveyed as a single ninety-six-minute shot.

Two stills from the movie, Baby Driver (2017), titled (a) and (b).

5.10a and 5.10b ***Baby Driver*** (2017). Continuous music and discontinuous cutting characteristic of music videos energize this film about a young getaway driver who locks into a different rock tune for each bank robbery.

Description

Each still shows a different angle of the male protagonist hiding behind a tree and carefully scanning the surrounding.

The Elements of Editing

Film editing is the process through which different images or shots are linked together sequentially. A shot is a continuous image, regardless of the camera movement or changes in focus it may record, and editing can produce meaning by combining shots in an infinite number of ways. One shot is selected and joined to other shots by the editor to guide viewers' perceptions. For example, the opening sequence of *Crooklyn* (1994) depicts the Brooklyn block where the film is set by editing together a high-angle moving crane shot that provides an overview of the neighborhood and its inhabitants and a variety of shots of people and their activities **[Figures 5.11a–5.11c]**.

(a)

(b)

(c)

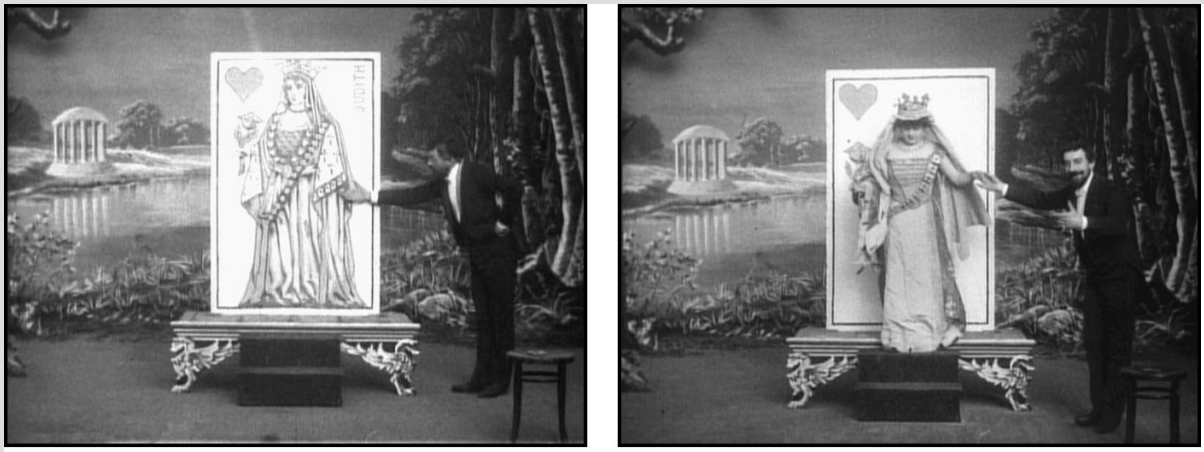
5.11a–5.11c *Crooklyn* (1994). The credits sequence of Spike Lee's film juxtaposes a moving crane shot of a Brooklyn block with a series of short takes of daily activities to convey a sense of a tight-knit community.

Description
Still (a) shows three young boys running through a street corner. Still (b) shows three young girls playing the hop-scopes game in the street. Still (c) shows three elderly men sitting at a table playing domino blocks.

Film editing conveys multiple perspectives by linking individual shots (each presented from a single perspective) in various relationships. Some of these relationships mimic the way a person looks at the world — for example, by linking a shot of someone looking off in the distance to an extreme long shot of an airplane in the sky. But often these relationships exceed everyday perceptions, as in a shot from *The Birds* (1963) that shows birds flying over Bodega Bay, an inhuman perspective that, juxtaposed with shots on street level, adds to the film's uncanny effect. Edited images may leap from one location to another or one time to another and may show different perspectives on the same event. Editing is one of the most significant developments in the syntax of cinema because it allows for a departure from both the limited perspective and the continuous duration of a shot.

The Cut and Other Transitions

The earliest films consisted of a single shot, which ran only as long as the reel of film in the camera lasted. In his early trick films, pioneer Georges Méliès manipulated this limitation by stopping the camera, rearranging the mise-en-scène, and resuming filming to make objects and people seem to disappear or transform. It was a short step to achieving such juxtapositions by physically cutting the film. In Méliès's 1903 film *Living Playing Cards*, a magician, played by Méliès himself, seems to make his props come alive **[Figures 5.12a and 5.12b]**.



(a) (b)

5.12a and 5.12b *Living Playing Cards* (1903). Pioneer George Méliès anticipated later editing techniques with magical transformations.

Description

Still (a), shows Méliès, on stage, exhibiting a life-size Queen card on a white screen. A screen at the background of the stage shows a forest scene with a pond at the center.

Still (b), shows the queen coming out alive from the card and stepping down from the screen. Méliès holds the queen by her left arm.

Even when they are intended to seem like magic, transitions between film shots and the technical labor of editing are often obscured. Rarely can viewers describe or enumerate the edits that make a particular film sequence memorable. Learning to watch for this basic element of film language gives the viewer insights into the art of the film.

The foundation for film editing is the *cut* — the join or splice between two pieces of film. This break in the image marks the physical connection between two shots from two different pieces of film. A single shot can depict a woman looking at a ship at sea by showing a close-up of her face and then panning to the right, following her glance to reveal the distant ship she is watching. A cut, on the other hand, renders this action in two shots, with the first showing the woman's face and the second showing the ship. The facts of the situation remain the same, but the two approaches — the single-shot pan and the cut joining two shots — create different experiences of the scenario. The first might emphasize the distance that separates the woman from the object of her vision. The second might create a sense of immediacy and intimacy that transcends the distance. In a key scene from *The Best Years of Our Lives* (1946), we first see several characters occupying different spaces of the same shot **[Figure 5.13a]**. After the character on the right shifts his attention to the character in the background, we are presented with a cut isolating them **[Figures 5.13b and 5.13c]**. As these examples

illustrate, the use of a cut usually follows a particular logic — in this case, emphasizing the significance of the character's gaze. The less frequently used **shock cut** juxtaposes two images whose dramatic difference creates a jarring effect, often accompanied by a jolt on the soundtrack, as in the shower murder sequence in *Psycho* (1960), emulated in countless subsequent horror films such as *The Visit* (2015) **[Figure 5.14]**. Later in this chapter, we investigate additional ways that editing may create logical or unexpected links among different images.

(a)

(b)

(c)

5.13a–5.13c ***The Best Years of Our Lives*** (1946). Director William Wyler uses composition in depth and editing to bring out developing tensions in the friendship of three returning veterans. **(a)** In the first shot, our attention is drawn to the figures in the foreground. **(b)** When Al turns to watch Fred make a difficult phone call in the background of the shot, **(c)** the film cuts to a second shot that emphasizes the relationship between these two figures.

Description

Still (a), shows two men, seated at a piano in a bar. One man plays on the piano, while the other watches. The third man watch them by standing beside them. The background shows the men seated at a bar table.

Still (b), shows the two men continue playing piano, while the man standing beside them turns around and looks at two other men seated at the bar table. The men turn around to listen to the music played on the piano.

Still (c), shows the close-up shot of the man who looks at the two men at the bar table.

5.14 ***The Visit*** (2015). The shock cut has remained a staple of editing in horror films as a way of dramatically unsettling the comfort of continuity editing with the sudden appearance of a frightening or startling image.

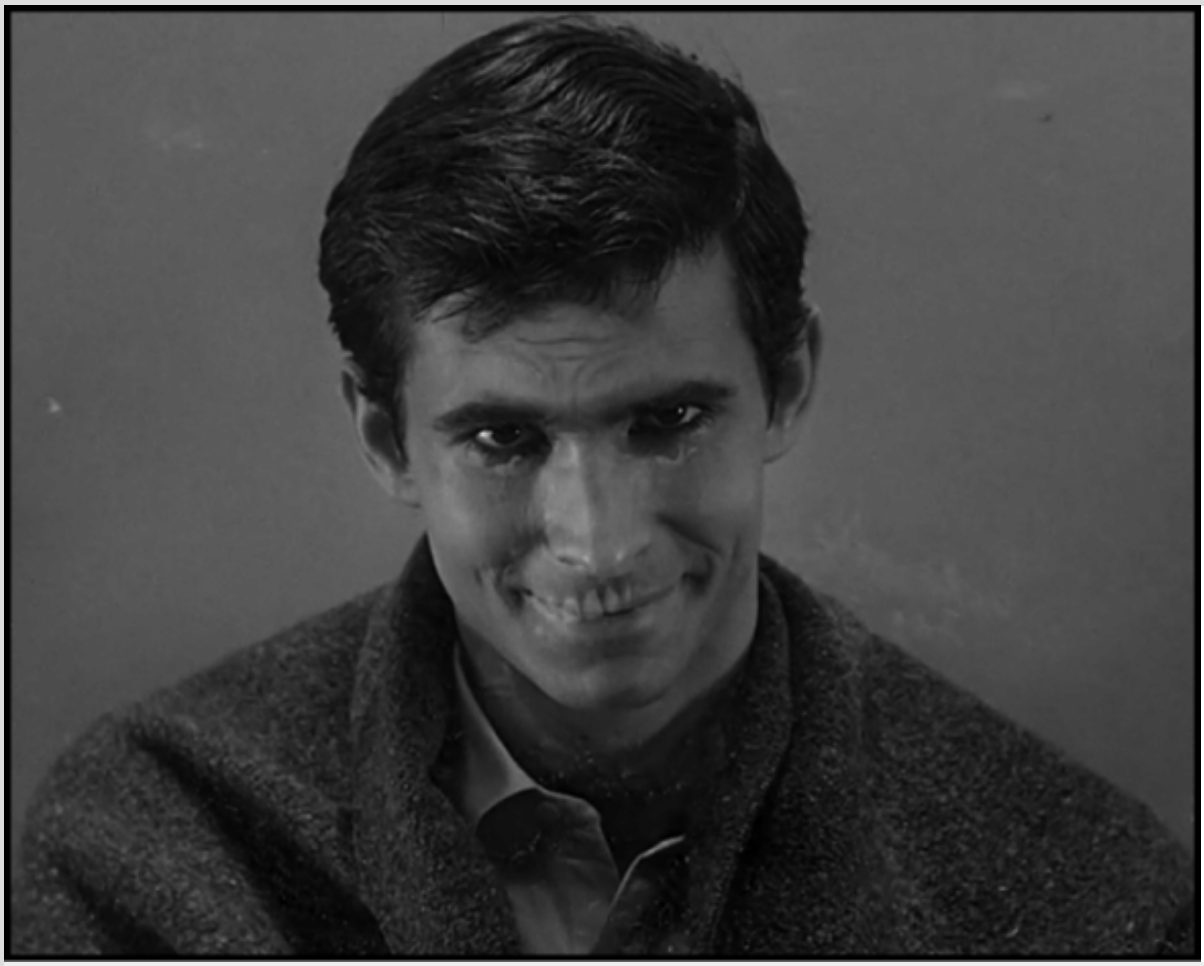
VIEWING CUE

Count the shots in the scene from *Chinatown* (1974) available online. What is the motivation behind each cut? What overall pattern do these cuts create?

Description
The scene shows a man working at his office cabin looking at the files, while the male protagonist, sitting opposite, is starring blindly into the distance. A play button is present at the center of the screenshot.

Edits can be embellished in ways that guide our experience and understanding of the transition. For example, a **fade-out** is an optical effect in which an image gradually darkens to black, and in a **fade-in** a black screen gradually brightens to a full picture (a fade-in often is used after a fade-out to create a transition between scenes). Alfred Hitchcock fades to black to mark the passing of time throughout *Rear Window* (1954). A **dissolve** briefly superimposes one shot over the next, which takes its place: one image fades out as another image fades in **[Figure 5.15]**. In studio-era Hollywood films, these devices were used to indicate a spatial or temporal break that is more definite than that done by straight cuts, and they often mark pauses between narrative sequences or larger segments of a film. A

dissolve can take us from one part of town to another, whereas a fade-out (a more visible break) can indicate that the action is resuming the next day. The iris (discussed in Chapter 4) masks the corners of the frame with a black, usually circular form **[Figure 5.16]**, and a **wipe** is a transition used to join two shots by moving a vertical, horizontal, or sometimes diagonal line across one image to replace it with a second image that follows the line across the frame **[Figure 5.17]**. Wipes and irises are most often found in silent and early sound films.



5.15 ***Psycho*** (1960). In another Hitchcock film, the concluding dissolve creates a terrifying merger in which a skull as the image of death emerges from the face of Norman Bates.

5.16 ***Broken Blossoms*** (1919). The iris often was used in films by D. W. Griffith to highlight objects or faces. Here it focuses our attention and emphasizes the vulnerability of Lillian Gish's character.

5.17 ***Desert Hearts*** (1985). In a film set in the 1950s, a wipe creates a nostalgic reference to earlier editing techniques, but it also may suggest a certain kind of transience in the world of the characters.

Although editing can generate an infinite number of combinations of images, rules have developed within the Hollywood storytelling tradition to limit those possibilities (as we discuss later in this chapter). Other film traditions, most notably those of avant-garde and experimental cinema (see Chapter 9), can be characterized by their degree of interest in exploiting the range of editing possibilities as a primary formal property of film.

VIEWING CUE

Look for other examples of transitional devices besides cuts. What spatial, temporal, or conceptual relationship is being set up between scenes joined by a fade, a dissolve, an iris, or a wipe?

When watching movies, we make sense of a series of discontinuous, linked images by understanding them according to conventional ways of interpreting space, time, story, and image patterns. We understand the action sequences in *Furious 7* (2015) despite the improbable feats performed by the characters. Likewise, we make connections among the three separate narratives from three separate periods in *The Hours* (2002). Editing patterns also anticipate and structure narrative organizations. The next three sections explore the spatial and temporal relationships established by editing and introduce the rules of the Hollywood continuity editing system. Subsequent discussion examines patterns of editing images based on graphic, movement, and rhythmic connections in order to show how different techniques provide very different experiences.

Continuity Style

In both narrative and non-narrative films, editing is a crucial strategy for ordering space and time. Two or more images can be linked to imply spatial and temporal relations to the viewer. **Verisimilitude** (literally, "the appearance of being true") is the quality of fictional representation that allows readers or viewers to accept a constructed world — its events, its characters, and their actions — as plausible. In cinematic storytelling, verisimilitude is enhanced by clear, consistent spatial and temporal patterns that — along with conventions of dialogue, mise-en-scène, cinematography,

and sound — form part of Hollywood's overall **continuity style**. In the commercial U.S. film industry, spatial and temporal continuity are greatly enhanced through conventions of editing. Because its constructions of space and time are so codified and widely used, we devote special consideration to this style.

VIEWING CUE

Estimate the number of shots in a scene from *Tangerine* (2015), then watch the scene, clapping with each cut. Were more shots used than you had imagined?

Description
The scene shows a woman with her hand raised. She appears to be in the middle of a conversation. A play button is present at the center of the screenshot.

The basic principle of *continuity editing* (sometimes called *invisible editing*) is that each shot has a continuous relationship to the next shot. It uses cuts and other transitions to establish verisimilitude, to construct a coherent time and space, and to tell stories clearly and efficiently, requiring minimal mental effort on the part of viewers. Two particular goals constitute the heart of this style — constructing an imaginary space in which the action develops and approximating the experience of real time by following human actions.

In continuity editing, after the initial view of a scene, subsequent shots typically follow the logic of spatial continuity. If a character appears at the left of the screen looking toward the right in the establishing shot, he or she probably will be shown looking in the same direction in the medium shot that follows. Movements that carry across cuts also adhere to a consistent screen direction. A character exiting the right of a frame probably will enter a new space from the left. Similarly, a chase sequence covering great distances is likely to provide directional cues.

Continuity editing has developed and deployed these patterns so consistently that it has become the dominant method of treating dramatic material, with its own set of rules that narrative filmmakers learn early. Continuity or invisible editing minimizes the perception of breaks between shots. The argument between the lovers in *The Notebook* (2004) uses numerous invisible cuts to shift focus from character to character and to underscore the scene's

emotional resonance as they move within the clearly delineated space between the front porch and a parked car.

Spatial patterns are frequently introduced through the use of an **establishing shot** — generally an initial long shot that establishes the location and setting and that orients the viewer in space to a clear view of the action. A scene in a western, as in *The Hateful Eight* (2015), might begin with an extreme long shot of wide-open space and then cut in to a shot that shows a stagecoach or saloon, followed by other, tighter shots introducing the characters and action.

A conversation usually is established with a relatively close shot of both characters (also known as a **two-shot**) in a recognizable spatial orientation and context. Then the camera alternates between the speaking characters, often using **over-the-shoulder shots** where the camera is positioned slightly behind and over the shoulder of one character, focusing on another character or object. It often is used when alternating between speaking characters. During an editing sequence that proceeds back and forth, the editor may insert **reestablishing shots** by periodically returning to the initial establishing shot to restore a seemingly objective view to spectators. Early in Howard Hawks's *The Big Sleep* (1946), when detective Philip Marlowe (played by Humphrey Bogart) is hired by General Sternwood, the scene opens with an establishing shot, and their conversation follows this pattern **[Figures 5.18a–5.18h]**. Although the conversation is presented by many shots that are edited together,

the transitions remain largely invisible because the angle from which each character is filmed remains consistent and the dialogue continues over the cuts. Such editing practices are ubiquitous. We have learned to expect that film conversations will be coordinated with medium close-ups of characters speaking and listening, just as we expect that these figures will be situated in a realistic space.

(a)

(b)

(c)

(d)

(e)

(f)

(g)

(h)

5.18a–5.18h ***The Big Sleep*** (1946). The simple interview, which provides a great deal of plot information, is broken down by many imperceptible cuts. After an initial establishing shot, alternating shots of the two characters in conversation cut in closer and closer and eventually focus our attention on the protagonist's face. Finally, the space is reestablished at the end of the interview.

Description
The first still shows, in a huge home garden, an elderly man in a wheelchair talking to the lead protagonist who sits opposite, while a third man, wearing suit and tie, fills a glass of drinks. The two subsequent stills capture both men talking. The fourth still shows the elderly man in the middle of his speech. The fifth shows the protagonist, who is rolling up his sleeves in the middle of is dialogue. The sixth captures the elderly man talking. The subsequent still shows a close-up of the protagonist during his speech. The last still shows the protagonist who is now standing next to a liquor table heading for a bottle; the elderly man looks on from behind.

Another device that is used in continuity editing is the **insert** — a brief shot, often a close-up, that points out details significant to the action. An insert might be a close-up of a hand slipping something into a pocket or a subtle smile that other characters do not see. The use of inserts helps overcome viewers' spatial separation from the action, pointing out significant details — for example, showing us an object of great meaning to a character or helping to establish the atmosphere of a desert scene **[Figure 5.19]**.

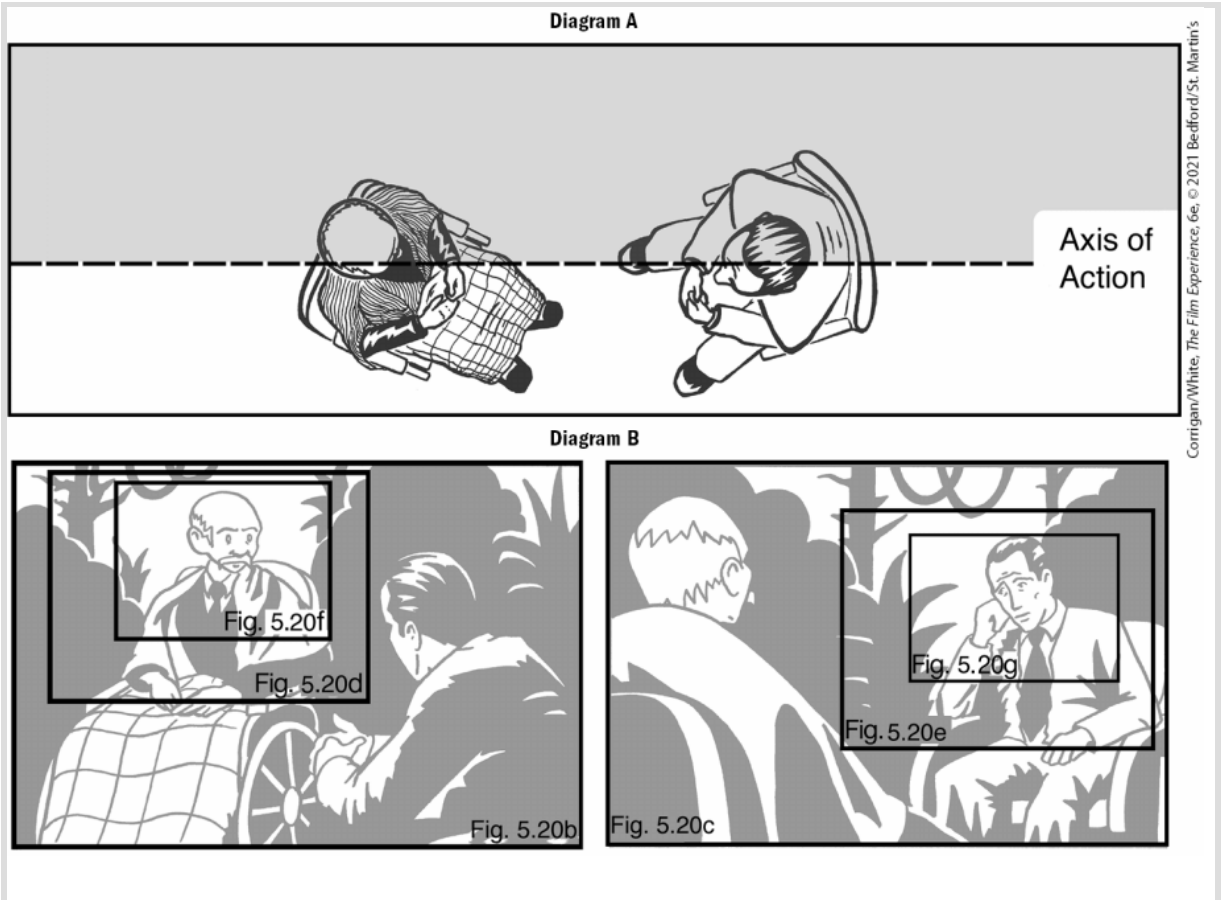
5.19 ***The Ballad of Buster Scruggs*** (2018). An insert shows a close-up of a horse's mouth.

Continuity editing minimizes disruptive effects and maximizes the viewer's ability to follow the action through practices that give a sense of spatial and temporal consistency. Some of these practices have become so codified that they are viewed as rules.

180-Degree Rule

The **180-degree rule** is the primary rule of continuity editing and one that many films and television shows consider sacrosanct. It restricts possible camera setups to the 180-degree area on one side of an imaginary line drawn between the characters or figures of a scene. The two diagrams in **[Figure 5.20]** illustrate the 180-degree rule in the scene from *The Big Sleep* (1946) discussed earlier. Marlowe and the general are filmed as if the space were bisected by a line known as the **axis of action**. All of the shots illustrated by the still images from *The Big Sleep* in Figures 5.18a–5.18h were taken

from one side of the axis. In general, any shot taken from the same side of the axis of action will ensure that the relative positions of people and other elements of mise-en-scène, as well as the directions of gazes and movements, will remain consistent. If the camera were to cross into the 180-degree field on the other side of the line (represented by the shaded area in Figure 5.20, Diagram A), the characters' onscreen positions would be reversed. During the unfolding of a scene, a new axis of action may be established by figure or camera movement. Directors may break the 180-degree rule and cross the line, either because they want to signify chaotic action or because conventional spatial continuity is not their primary aim.



5.20 ***The Big Sleep*** (1946). **Diagram A** illustrates the 180-degree rule by depicting the imaginary axis of action, bisecting the conversation scene from *The Big Sleep*. All shots in **Diagram B**, which illustrates the editing of the conversation with reference to Figures 5.19b–5.19g, were taken from the white portion of Diagram A. Each character is depicted in tighter framings from a consistent camera angle. If the camera were to cross over to the shaded portion, the position of the characters onscreen would be reversed.

Description
Diagram A shows the top view of two men having a conversation, seated facing each other. The man seated in the wheelchair sits on the left while the other man seats in a chair on the right. The axis of the action line passes nearly through the middle horizontally. The portion above the line is shaded. The first of diagram B shows the face of the man in the wheelchair and an angular back view of the other man. The second part of diagram B shows the back view of the man in the wheelchair and the front view of the chair. The man in the chair sits with his face resting on his right.

30-Degree Rule

The **30-degree rule** illustrates the extent to which continuity editing attempts to preserve spatial unity. This rule specifies that a shot should be followed by another shot taken from a position greater than 30 degrees from that of the first. In *Winter's Bone* (2010), when Ree shows her younger siblings how to skin a squirrel, an over-the-shoulder shot that emulates her point of view is followed by a medium shot in profile taken at a right angle to the action. The rule aims to emphasize the motivation for the cut by giving a

substantially different view of the action. If a shot of the same subject is taken within 30 degrees of the previous shot, it will appear to jump in position onscreen.

Shot/Reverse Shot

VIEWING CUE

Does the film you watched most recently in class follow continuity patterns, such as the 180-degree rule? Locate an example, and identify other ways that spatial continuity is maintained.

One of the most common spatial practices within continuity editing, and a regular application of the 180-degree rule, is the **shot/reverse-shot** pattern (also called the *shot/countershot*). It begins with a shot of one character looking offscreen in one direction, followed by a shot of a second character who appears to be looking back. The effect is that the characters seem to be looking at each other. In the example from *The Big Sleep*, this pattern begins with a shot of Philip Marlowe taken from an angle at one end of the axis of action, continues with a shot of the general from the "reverse" angle at the other end of the axis, and proceeds back and forth. As can be seen in Figure 5.20, Diagram B, the camera distance changes from medium shot to close-up as the scene unfolds, but the angle on each character in the shot/reverse-shot pattern does not. The use of over-the-shoulder shots in shot/reverse-shot sequences increases the perception of

viewer participation in a conversation. As Alma Elson exchanges looks with designer Reynolds Woodcock in *Phantom Thread* (2017), the 180-degree change in angle — known as cutting on the line — and symmetrical composition in the shot/reverse-shot sequence describes the subtle but powerful control she has assumed over the obsessive fashion designer **[Figures 5.21a and 5.21b]**.

5.21a and 5.21b *Phantom Thread* (2017). A shot of Alma Elson (Vicky Krieps) followed by a reverse shot of her lover Reynolds Woodcock (Daniel Day-Lewis).

Description
The first still shows an over the shoulder shot of a female character in the movie. The second still shows an over the shoulder shot of a man.

Eyeline Match

Shot/reverse-shot sequences use characters' gazes to establish the continuous space of the conversation. A cut that follows a shot of a character looking offscreen with a shot of a subject whose screen

position matches the gaze of the character in the first shot is called an **eyeline match** **[Figures 5.22a and 5.22b]**. If a character looks toward the left, the screen position of the character or object in the next shot will likely appear to match the gaze. Eyelines give the illusion of continuous offscreen space into which characters could move beyond the left and right edges of the frame.

(a)

(b)

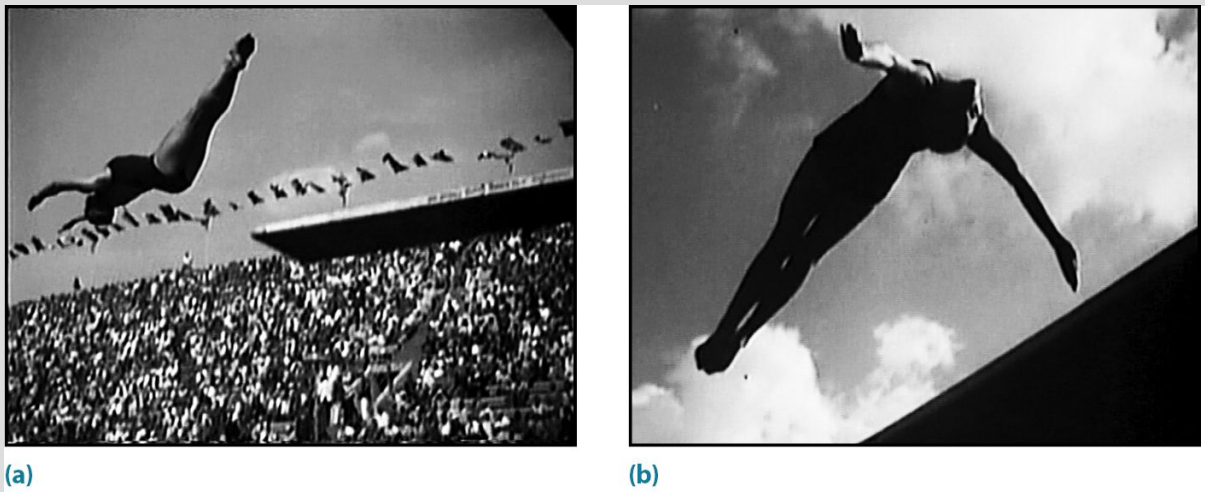
5.22a and 5.22b *Carol* (2015). In this early scene, an eyeline match directs our gaze to the protagonist's first vision of the woman with whom she will fall in love.

Description

The first still shows a young female character standing inside the billing counter of a gift shop and looking into the distance. The second still shows two women, one in the background looking for items in the shop while the woman in the background and stands and stares into the distance.

Match on Action

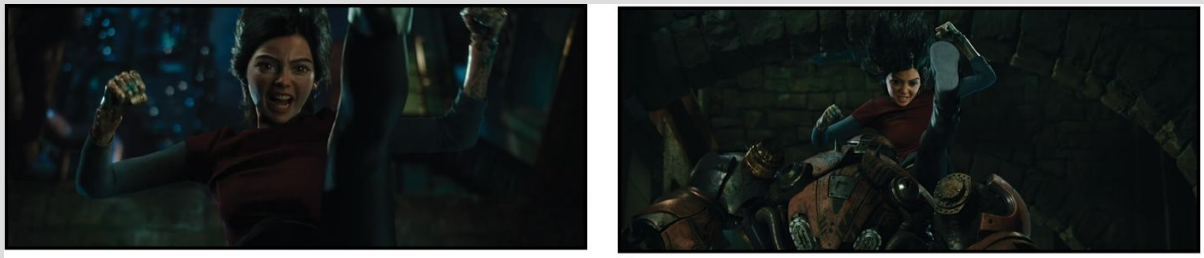
To match images through movement means that the direction and pace of actions, gestures, and other movements are linked with corresponding or contrasting movements in one or more other shots. Leni Riefenstahl's extraordinary editing of athletes in motion in her documentary *Olympia* (1938) has become a model for sports montages **[Figures 5.23a and 5.23b]**. A common version of this pattern is the continuity editing device called a **match on action** — a cut between two shots continuing a visual action. In this technique, the direction of an action is picked up by cutting to a shot depicting the continuation of that action, such as matching the movement of a stone tossed in the air to the flight of that stone as it hits a window. Often a match on action obscures the cut itself, such as when the cut occurs just as a character opens a door, and the next shot shows the character shutting the door from the other side.



5.23a and 5.23b *Olympia* (1938). The seemingly superhuman mobility of Olympic divers is enhanced by Leni Riefenstahl's editing.

Description
The first still shows a woman diver, midair during her performance in a stadium with spectators in the background. The second still shows a close up of the diver midair.

Cutting on action — or editing during an onscreen movement — also quickens a scene or film's pace. Action sequences such as fights and chases exploit these possibilities by relying on the spatial consistency of continuity editing to convey what's happening and by using variation to increase the surprise and excitement **[Figures 5.24a and 5.24b]**.



(a) (b)

5.24a and 5.24b ***Alita: Battle Angel*** (2019). The tension and suspense of battle between cyborg Alita and her adversary increases through cutting on movement and matching on action.

Description
The first still shows the protagonist midair as if approaching to kick someone with her legs. The second still shows the protagonist midair seconds before hitting a huge robot character with her legs.

Graphic Match

Formal patterns, shapes, masses, colors, lines, and lighting patterns within images can link or define a series of shots according to graphic qualities **[Figures 5.25a and 5.25b]**. This is most easily envisioned in abstract forms: one pattern of images may develop according to diminishing sizes, beginning with large shapes and proceeding through increasingly smaller shapes; another pattern may alternate the graphics of lighting, switching between brightly lit shots and dark, shadowy shots; yet another pattern might make use of lines within the frame by assembling different shots whose horizontal and vertical lines create specific visual effects. Many

experimental films highlight just this level of abstraction in the editing. Similarly, commercials capitalize on graphic qualities to convey their message visually.

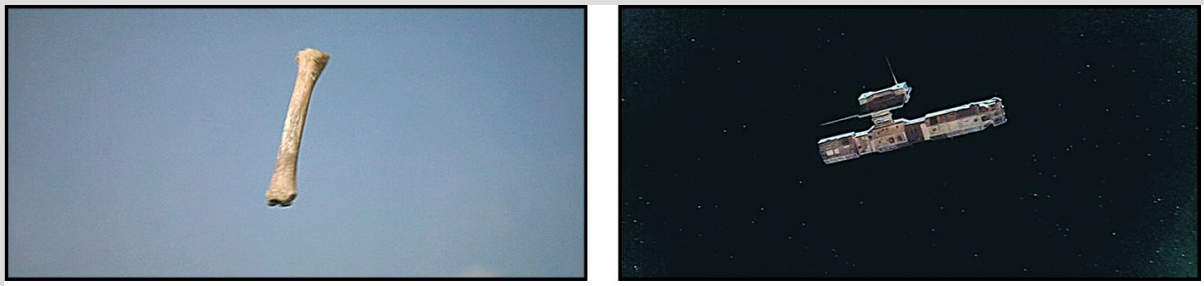
(a)

(b)

5.25a and 5.25b ***The Namesake*** (2006). A family drama set on two continents uses graphic elements to connect India and the United States.

Description
The first still shows a bridge through the window. The second still shows an elderly Indian woman, with a worried expression, staring outside into the distance from a window.

Although it may not be their organizing principle, narrative films edit according to graphic qualities as well. This can have an aesthetic effect — by emphasizing sharp angles or soothing colors. Coherence in shape and scale often serves a specific narrative purpose, as in the continuity editing device called a **graphic match** — an edit in which a dominant shape or line in one shot provides a visual transition to a similar shape or line in the next shot. One of the most famous examples of a graphic match links the shape of a bone tossed in the air to the shape of a spaceship in outer space in Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968) **[Figures 5.26a and 5.26b]**.



(a) (b)

5.26a and 5.26b ***2001: A Space Odyssey*** (1968). Centuries are elided in a graphic match, which functions at the same time as a match on action.

Description
The first still shows a bone against a blue background. The second still shows a space ship.

Point-of-View Shots

Many of Alfred Hitchcock's most suspenseful scenes are edited to highlight the drama of looking. Often a character is shown looking, and the next shot shows the character's optical point of view, as if the camera (and hence the viewer) were seeing with the eyes of the character. Such point-of-view shots are often followed by a third shot in which the character is again shown looking, which reclaims the previous shot as his or her literal perspective. In a tense scene from *The Birds* (1963) in which the heroine, Melanie, sits on a bench outside a school as threatening crows gather on the playground behind her, Hitchcock uses both eyeline matches and point-of-view sequences. A bird flying high overhead catches Melanie's attention **[Figure 5.27a]**. When she turns her head to follow its flight, the shots are matched by her eyeline **[Figure 5.27b]**. Next comes a point-of-view sequence through which suspense is prolonged by showing Melanie's reaction before the sinister sight of congregating birds **[Figures 5.27c and 5.27d]**. The editing of this scene serves both to construct a realistic space and to increase our identification with Melanie by focusing solely on the act of looking.

5.27a–5.27d ***The Birds*** (1963). **(a)–(b)** A low-angle shot of a flying bird is matched to Melanie's eyeline. **(c)–(d)** We see Melanie's shocked face and then a point-of-view shot of the gathering birds.

Description
The first still shows a bird in the sky. The second and the third stills show a woman looking toward the sky with a worried expression. The fourth still shows a gathering of birds outdoor in a children's playground.

Elsewhere in the film, the point of view of Melanie's romantic interest, Mitch, is conveyed by partially masking the frame as if we were looking along with him through his binoculars. Similarly, when a character wakes from a knock on the head, we may see a blurry image, foregrounding the subjective effect of the point-of-view construction.

Reaction Shots

These components of the continuity system — which also include shot/reverse-shot patterns, eyeline matches, and point-of-view shots — construct space around the characters' behavior. The editing highlights human agency. A **reaction shot**, which depicts a character's response to something shown in a previous shot **[Figure 5.28]**, emphasizes human perspective in a way that can be seen as standing in for the audience's own response. The cut back to the character "claims" the view of the previous shot as subjective. A scene from *Clueless* (1995) in which the protagonist, Cher, and her friends, Dionne and Tai, converse in a coffee-shop booth shows a typical conversation edited for continuity. The scene begins with a tracking establishing shot that depicts the overall environment **[Figure 5.29a]**. Then the scene cuts back and forth across the booth in a shot/reverse-shot pattern using eyeline matches **[Figures 5.29b–5.29d]**. Cher sits alone and has most of the scene's shots, indicating that she is the focal point of our identification. In this way, continuity editing constructs spatial relationships to create a plausible and human-centered world onscreen.

5.28 ***The Way We Were*** (1973). This reaction shot of Barbara Streisand's face registers her character's response to catching sight of her former lover.

5.29a–5.29d ***Clueless*** (1995). After **(a)** an establishing shot, this conversation alternates **(b and d)** shots of the heroine Cher's friends with **(c)** a reverse shot of Cher, maintaining spatial continuity.

Description
The first still shows three women sitting in a restaurant and chatting; two sit on one side of the table and the other sits opposite. The second still shows the lead protagonist sitting beside her friend. The third still shows the girl sitting opposite. The fourth still shows the lead character in the middle of her speech.

Art Cinema Editing

Continuity editing strives for an overall effect of coherent space; however, many films, especially art films, use editing to construct less predictable spatial relations. For example, in Carl Theodor Dreyer's *The Passion of Joan of Arc* (1928), a series of close-ups against a white background conveys the psychological intensity of Joan's testimony before the inquisitors while never giving an overview of the space. The use of close-ups elevates the spiritual subject matter over the worldly space of her surroundings that establishing shots and eyeline matches would depict **[Figures 5.30a–5.30c]**. Japanese director Yasujiro Ozu often uses graphic elements to provide continuity across cuts. In *Early Summer* (1951), rather than editing to show an optical point of view, he sets up his camera near the ground to balance his compositions around characters sitting on the floor. These directors provide significant challenges to the "rules" of Hollywood editing.

(a)

(b)

(c)

5.30a–5.30c ***The Passion of Joan of Arc*** (1928). The juxtaposition of the inquisitors' faces with that of Renée Falconetti as Joan ignores spatial continuity but is freighted with power and significance.

Description
The first still shows a close-up shot of a female character. The second still shows a close-up shot of a male character. The third still shows a close-up of an elderly man's character.

In postwar cinemas, directors explored characters' restlessness through editing that defied continuity. In Michelangelo Antonioni's

film *L'Avventura* (1960), cuts join spaces that are not necessarily contiguous. The landscapes the characters move through express their psychological state of alienation in a way that a realistic use of space would not. Contemporary independent films may incorporate editing styles innovated in art cinema to convey a character's state of mind or a state of being that departs from the ordinary. In *Beasts of the Southern Wild* (2012), the editing contributes to a sense of enchantment and loss in a close-knit bayou community flooded during a storm **[Figures 5.31a and 5.31b]**. We discuss such alternatives in greater detail later in the chapter (see Primary Traditions in Editing Practices: Continuity, Disjunctions, and Convergences).

(a) (b)

5.31a and 5.31b ***Beasts of the Southern Wild*** (2012). Cutting between two views of the protagonist, Hushpuppy, conveys her magical, dreamlike experiences.

Description
The first still shows a blurry silhouette of a child. The second still shows the protagonist from the back.

Editing and Temporality

Editing is one of the chief ways that temporality is manipulated in narrative film. A two-hour film may condense centuries in a story. Less frequently, it may expand story time, as in a prolonged rescue or a dream sequence. It is helpful to keep distinct the concepts of **story time**, the temporal length and range of events inferred during the telling of a film's story (such as the actual years when a young girl grows to become an older woman, most of which takes place offscreen); **plot time**, the temporal selection and arrangement of events from that story (such as key moments when that young woman discovers something new about herself); and **screen time**, the actual length of time that a movie takes to tell its story (such as the 120 minutes or so when an audience views the film). Film is a time-based medium, and editing strongly affects our experience of the temporal unfolding.

Flashbacks and Flashforwards

Through its power to manipulate **chronology** — the order according to which shots or scenes convey the temporal sequence of the story's events — editing organizes narrative time. A sequence of shots or scenes may describe the temporal development of events as one event or action follows another in progressive order, or it may order events and actions in a nonlinear fashion whereby the temporal order appears like pieces of a puzzle for the viewer to solve.

Editing may juxtapose events out of their temporal order in the story. When using continuity editing, any nonlinear time constructions tend to be introduced with strict cues about narrative motivation. For example, a **flashback** — a sequence that follows an image set in the present with an image set in the past — may be introduced with a dissolve conveying the character's memory or with voiceover narration indicating the shifting timeframe. A large number of flashbacks can blur the line between linear and nonlinear structure. In one sense, *Citizen Kane* (1941) follows a linear narrative, as a reporter conducts a series of interviews and investigations when he looks for an angle on a great man's death. However, the story of Kane's life is provided in a series of lengthy flashbacks that add complexity to the film's chronology. Certain events are narrated more than once, a manipulation of **narrative frequency** — the number of times a plot element is repeated throughout a narrative. In more recent films, such temporal shifts may not be signaled by external cues. *Blue Jasmine* (2013) shifts fluidly between the down-on-her-luck heroine's present existence and scenes of her extravagant lifestyle before her marriage ended. Yet even in this case, the heroine's mental state serves as a motivation for the temporal play; the audience is given cues to follow the narrative's complexity.

The less common **flashforward** is a sequence that connects an image set in the present with one or more future images. Because it involves "seeing" the future, the technique usually is reserved for

works that intentionally challenge our perceptions — movies focused on psychology or science fiction. In Nicolas Roeg's *Don't Look Now* (1973), for example, a couple is tormented by the recent death of their daughter, and haunting images of a small figure in a red rain slicker prove to be flashforwards to a revelatory encounter **[Figure 5.32]**. In *Memento* (2000), the chronology of scenes is completely reversed, but the maintenance of continuity within each scene allows us to follow the film.

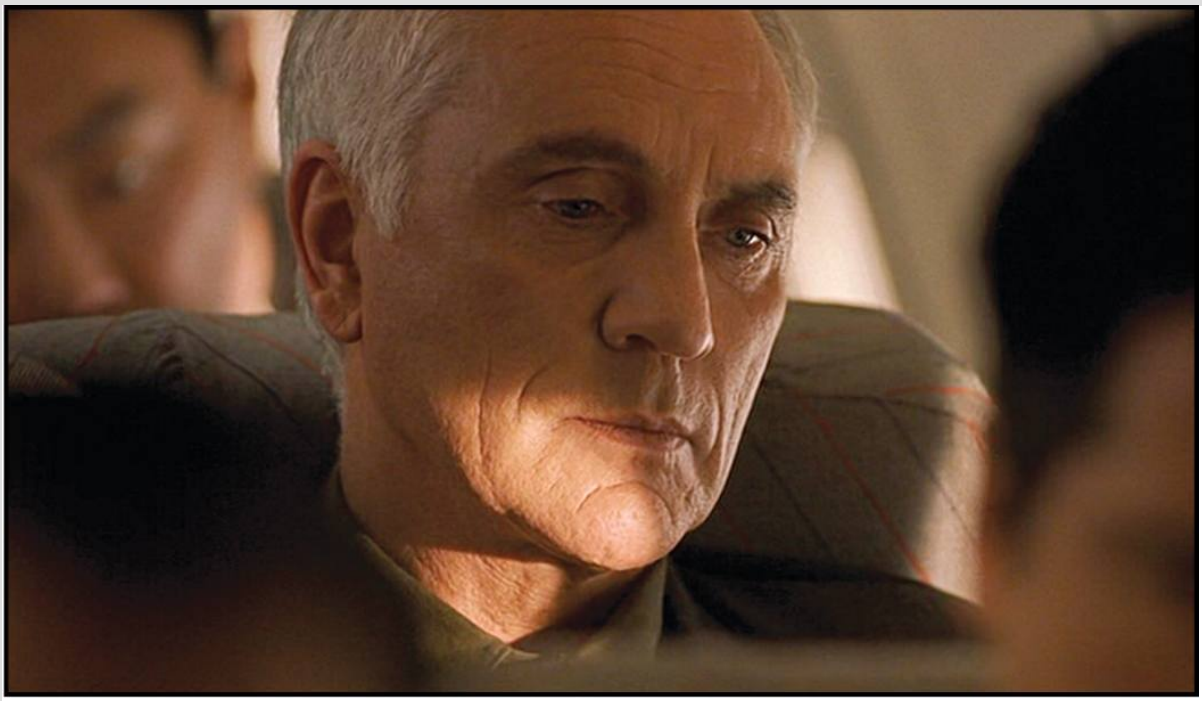
5.32 ***Don't Look Now*** (1973). Images of a small figure in red prove to be flashforwards to a horrifying encounter with the memories of a lost child.

Descriptive and Temporally Ambiguous Sequences

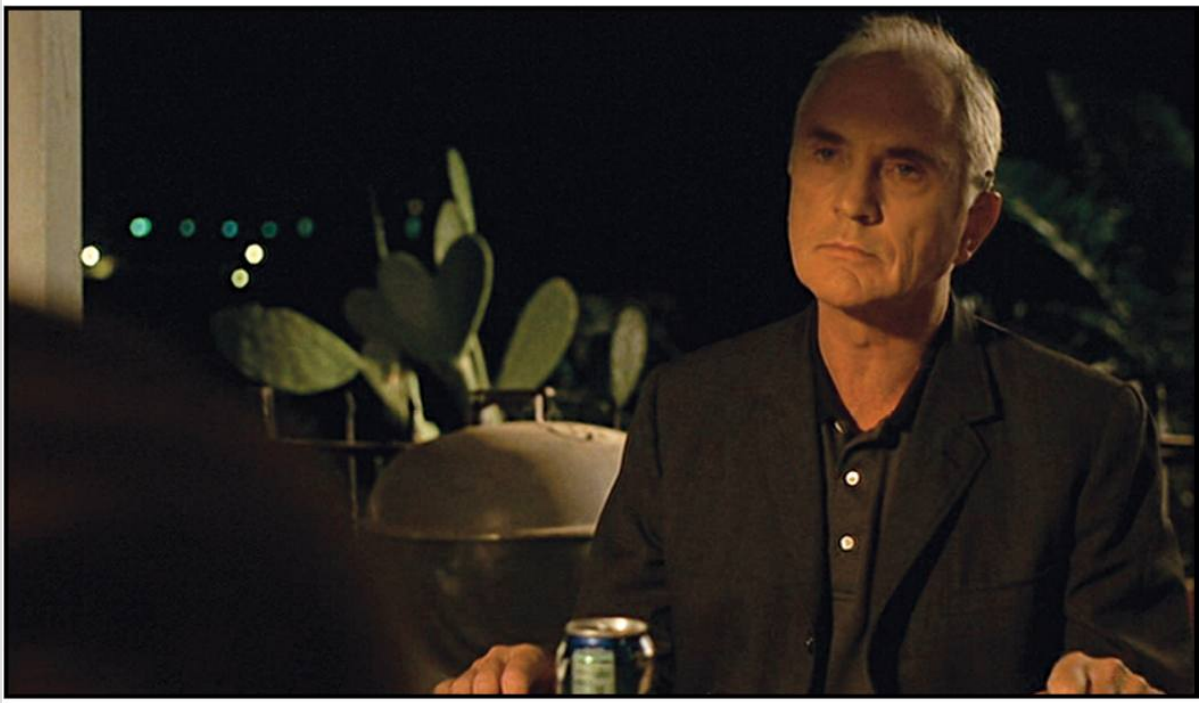
Certain edited sequences cannot be located precisely in time. The purpose of such a sequence is often descriptive, such as a series of shots identifying the setting of a film. As one character in *An American in Paris* (1951) describes the heroine to another, we see a series of shots depicting her different qualities (with different outfits to match). These vignettes are descriptive and do not follow a linear or other temporal sequence. Music videos also defy chronology in favor of associative editing patterns.

In art films and increasingly in commercial narrative films, the cinema can be prized for its ability to depict ambiguous temporality. Thus, editing may defy realism in favor of psychological constructions of time. Writer Marguerite Duras and director Alain Resnais make time the subject of their film *Hiroshima mon amour* (1959), which constantly relates the present-day story, set in Japan, to a character's past. An image of her lover's hand sparks the female protagonist's memory of being a teenager in France during World War II, and the flashback begins with a matching image of another hand. But temporality is such an important dimension of film narration that even more traditional narratives explore the relationship between the order of events onscreen and those of the story. Steven Soderbergh's *The Limey* (1999) ingeniously inserts shots of the activities of the protagonist, played by Terence Stamp, into the narrative but out of sequence, keeping us guessing about temporal relations **[Figures 5.33a and 5.33b]**. *Inception* (2010) complicates our

sense of time by making us question whether entire sequences are dreams or events in the lives of the characters.



(a)



(b)

5.33a and 5.33b ***The Limey*** (1999). Different shots of the protagonist (Terence Stamp) appear in the film without a clear sense of when they occurred.

Description
The first still shows close-up shot of the male protagonist sitting in a plane. The second still shows the character sitting at a table.

Duration

Narrative duration refers to the length of time used to present an event or action in a plot. This may not conform to the length of time that passes in the story. Editing is one of the most useful techniques for manipulating narrative duration; it can contract or expand story time. Although actions may seem to flow in a continuous fashion, editing allows for **ellipsis** — an abridgement in time in the narrative implied by editing. Cutting strategies both within scenes and from scene to scene attempt to cover such ellipses. Grabbing a coat, exiting through the front door, and turning the key in the car ignition might serve to indicate a journey from one locale to the next. As we have seen, transitional devices such as dissolves and fades also manipulate the duration of narration. Without the acceptance of such conventions, time would be experienced in a disorienting fashion.

A continuity editing device that is used to condense time is the **cutaway** — a shot that interrupts an action to "cut away" to another image or action (for example, to a man trapped inside a burning building), often to abridge time, before returning to the first shot or

scene at a point further along in time. We are so accustomed to such handling of the duration of depicted events that a scene in real time — such as the single shot of the central character taking a bath in *Jeanne Dielman, 23 Quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* (1975) — seems unnaturally long [Figure 5.34].

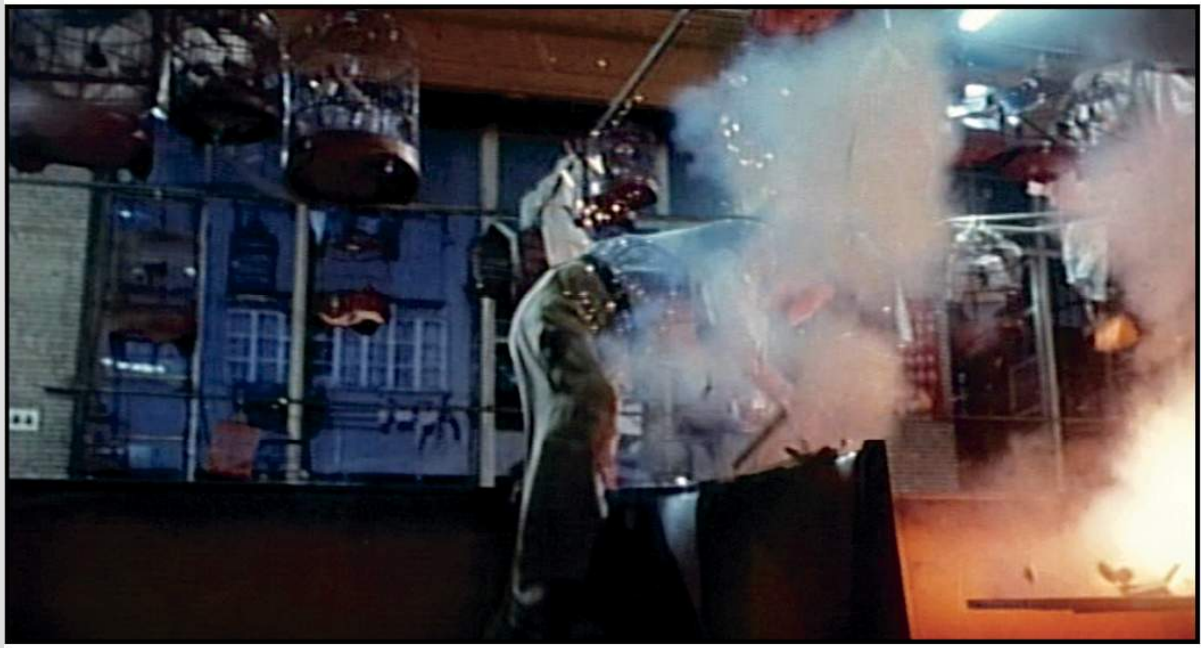
5.34 ***Jeanne Dielman, 23 Quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles*** (1975). This long take records the protagonist's bath in real time. The film's pacing emulates the everyday routine of the housewife.

Less frequent than the condensation of time, the extension of time through overlapping editing occurs when an edited sequence presents two or more shots of the same action across several cuts. In *Battleship Potemkin* (1925), a sailor, frustrated with the conditions aboard ship, is shown repeatedly smashing a plate he is washing.

Plot time in this scene is longer than that of the action. The effect is to emphasize this small moment's decisive importance in a heroic narrative of the sailors' mutiny.

Overlapping editing is a violation in a continuity system, and although it can be used for emphasis or for foreshadowing, it often appears strange or gimmicky. In a masterfully choreographed fight scene in John Woo's *Hard Boiled* (1992), shots of the hero's balletic leap are overlapped **[Figures 5.35a and 5.35b]**. Such instances of prolonging narrative duration emphasize editing's rhythm, pulse, and pattern over story event.

(a)



(b)

5.35a and 5.35b *Hard Boiled* (1992). The hero shoots up a restaurant without himself being hit. His leaps are prolonged through overlapping editing, which makes the scene even more spectacular.

Pace

The **pace** of a film is the tempo at which it seems to move, influenced by the duration of individual shots and the style of editing. The fast pace of a spy action movie like *Jason Bourne* (2016) contrasts with the more relaxed pace of a comedy like *School of Rock* (2003) or the slow elliptical editing of meditative films like *Melancholia* (2011) and *Leave No Trace* (2018) **[Figures 5.36a and 5.36b]**. Chase scenes are likely to be cut more quickly than conversations. Pace may vary historically, culturally, and stylistically. There are no strict rules of pacing, although some editors may measure shot lengths exactly to achieve a desired rhythm.

(a)

(b)

5.36a and 5.36b *Leave No Trace* (2018). This film is paced with a measured editing style to capture the secluded, meditative perspectives of its characters.

Observers have noted that the **average shot length** (ASL) of narrative films has decreased over recent decades, and they correlate these measures to industry and narrative patterns as well as to processes of human perception. Rapid cutting of films whose average shot length may be less than two seconds has been enabled by digital technologies and driven by the prevalence of blockbuster action films.

A different way of controlling pace through editing is by using **long takes**, or shots of relatively long duration. Classical film theorist André Bazin is famous for his advocacy of the long take in such post–World War II films as William Wyler's *The Best Years of Our Lives* (1946). Bazin especially championed the **sequence shot**, in which an entire scene is played out in space and time in a single shot, arguing that this type of filmmaking more closely approximates human perception and is thus more realistic than editing. Films that are cut with a preponderance of long takes use mise-en-scène — including blocking and acting — and camera movement instead of editing to focus viewers' attention.

Two different tests of Bazin's theories can be seen in contemporary uses of the long take. Shots that are sustained for what can seem an inordinate amount of time are prevalent in the styles of directors of contemporary international art films, prompting researchers to coin the term **slow cinema** for these works. *Flowers of Shanghai* (1998), by Taiwanese filmmaker Hou Hsiao-hsien, unfolds with only forty

shots. The long takes evoke the city's past and vanished way of life. Minimal narrative incident, a contemplative or neutral camera, and a patient spectator are required of such films, in which editing's deliberate pace is one of the most defining aesthetic criteria.

Long takes and sequence shots are used by Quentin Tarantino and other contemporary directors not to promote Bazin's realism but to craft virtuoso displays of the kinetic possibilities of cinema. The spectacular unbroken shots in films like Tarantino's *Kill Bill: Vol. 2* (2004) keep pace with the film's otherwise rapid editing by the impressive choreography of characters, sets, and camera movement.

Most films use shot length to create a rhythm that relates to the particular aims of the film. One of the most influential examples of fast cutting, the infamous shower murder sequence from Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960), uses seventy camera setups for forty-five seconds of footage, with the many cuts launching a parallel attack on viewers' senses. In contrast, Alfonso Cuarón's *Children of Men* (2006) produces its uncanny mood in part through lengthy tracking shots. In these examples, pace is specific to the film and also a distinctive element of the director's style.

Rhythm

The early French avant-garde filmmaker Germaine Dulac defined film as "a visual symphony made of rhythmic images." Rhythm or **rhythmic editing** describes the organization of editing according to different paces or tempos determined by how quickly cuts are made. Like the tempos that describe the rhythmic organization of music, editing in this fashion may link a rapid succession of quick shots, a series of slowly paced long takes, or shots of varying length to modulate the time between cuts. In *Rocket Man* (2019), a biopic about rock star Elton John, the rhythm of the editing follows the music **[Figures 5.37a and 5.37b]**. Because rhythm is a fundamental property of editing, it often is combined with continuity aims or graphic patterns.

(a)

(b)

5.37a and 5.37b *Rocket Man* (2019). The rhythms in the cutting of numerous sequences reflect the energy of the music by Bernie Taupin and Elton John.

Description

The first still shows a band performing on the stage in a concert hall full of people. The second still shows the pianist performing his piece with his right leg on the piano.

VIEWING CUE

Time the shots of the sequence from *The General* (1927) available online. How does the rhythm of the editing in the sequence contribute to the film's mood or meaning?

Description
The scene shows the lead character jumping from one train car to another. A play button is present at the center of the screenshot.

Without editing, a film's screen time would equal its plot time. Incorporating cuts shows the complexity of temporality in narrative

film by organizing the order, frequency, and duration of events and descriptive information. Documentary and experimental films manipulate temporality through editing as well. Finally, editing is also integral to the viewer's physical experience of watching movies as they unfold in time: its rhythms can make us tense and fearful, calm and contemplative, or energized and euphoric.

Scenes and Sequences

The coordination of temporal and spatial editing patterns beyond the relationship between two shots results in a higher level of cinematic organization in both narrative and non-narrative films. *Scene* and *sequence* are two terms for larger units of edited shots that are helpful to conceive of separately, even though they are not always strictly distinguished. In a narrative film, a **scene** is composed of one or more shots that depict a continuous space and time — such as a conversation filmed following the 180-degree rule. A **sequence** is any number of shots that are unified as a coherent action (such as a walk to school) or an identifiable motif (such as the expression of anger), regardless of changes in time and space. If the conversation ends with one character rising from the breakfast table and subsequent shots show the character driving, grabbing a coffee, and taking the elevator to work, the unit is a sequence. The editing bridges any changes of setting and covers ellipses of time, but the character continues one primary action, and no significant time passes. In a nonfiction film, a sequence could be defined by a topic

or an aesthetic pattern. Editing combines and organizes a film's many scenes and sequences into patterns according to the logic of a particular story or mode of filmmaking.

What is the temporal organization of the film you've just viewed for class? Does the film follow a strict chronology? How does the editing abridge or expand time?

One way to relate editing on the micro, shot-to-shot level to editing on a macro level is by **segmentation** — the process of dividing a film into large narrative units for the purpose of analysis. A classical film may have forty scenes and sequences but only ten large segments corresponding to the significant moves of the plot. In such films, locating editing transitions such as fades and dissolves can help point to these divisions, which occur at significant changes in narrative space, time, characters, or action. Tracing the logic of a particular film's editing on this level gives insight into how film narratives are organized. For example, the setting of a film's first scene may be identical to that of the last scene, or two segments showing the same characters may represent a significant change in their relationship. Although these structural units and relations may be dictated in the script, editing realizes them onscreen.

TECHNOLOGY IN ACTION

Editing, Then and Now

The formal possibilities of film editing have always been bound up with production and postproduction technologies. How much film can be shot, and how can that film later be edited? These questions have often determined, in many ways, the formal styles and strategies that are part of the finished film.

In the early years of cinema, filmmakers would necessarily edit their films in the camera while shooting. For filmmakers like the Lumière brothers in the late 1890s, editing their films of barely a minute or so meant stopping the camera in order to change a perspective, an action, or object. In 1995, to commemorate the one hundredth anniversary of cinema, major filmmakers from around the world used the Lumière camera to make films with the same restrictions: no more than fifty-two seconds in length, no synchronized sound, and no more than three takes [**Figure 5.38a**].

5.38a ***Lumière and Company*** (1995). For this anthology film, celebrated directors including Helma Sanders-Brahms, David Lynch, and Zhang Yimou used the same type of camera as the Lumière brothers in the 1890s.

For most of the twentieth century, professional editing occurred on a Steenbeck editing table, a flatbed table first introduced in 1931 and ubiquitous for many years after **[Figure 5.38b]**. This technology allowed editors to rotate celluloid film stock through nylon rollers, carefully inspect individual frames, move temporally backward and forward, and delete or insert different images across the linear rotation of the stock. This linear layout and movement in editing worked harmoniously with the goals of continuity editing and linear film narratives.

Marvin Joseph/The Washington Post/Getty Images

5.38b Steenbeck editing table. This table was a ubiquitous piece of editing technology from 1931 until the 1990s.

With digital editing systems, beginning in 1991, the priorities of linearity gave way to new freedoms. With this technology, film images are loaded into a computer, and an editor can choose and arrange scenes and sequences in multiple ways. As a

result, there are virtually limitless possibilities for the placement of images and the manipulations of temporal sequences. For example, Mike Figgis's *Timecode* (2000), a drama set in a Los Angeles movie production house, divides the screen into four different quadrants to present simultaneous actions taking place in different locations [**Figure 5.38c**].

5.38c *Time Code* (2000). This film demonstrates the freedom of modern editing technology by dividing the screen into four quadrants depicting simultaneous action in multiple locations.

Description
The first three quadrants show three women in different locations talking on their cell phones. The fourth quadrant shows a woman videotaping a man lying dead on the floor with blood gushing out from his stomach.

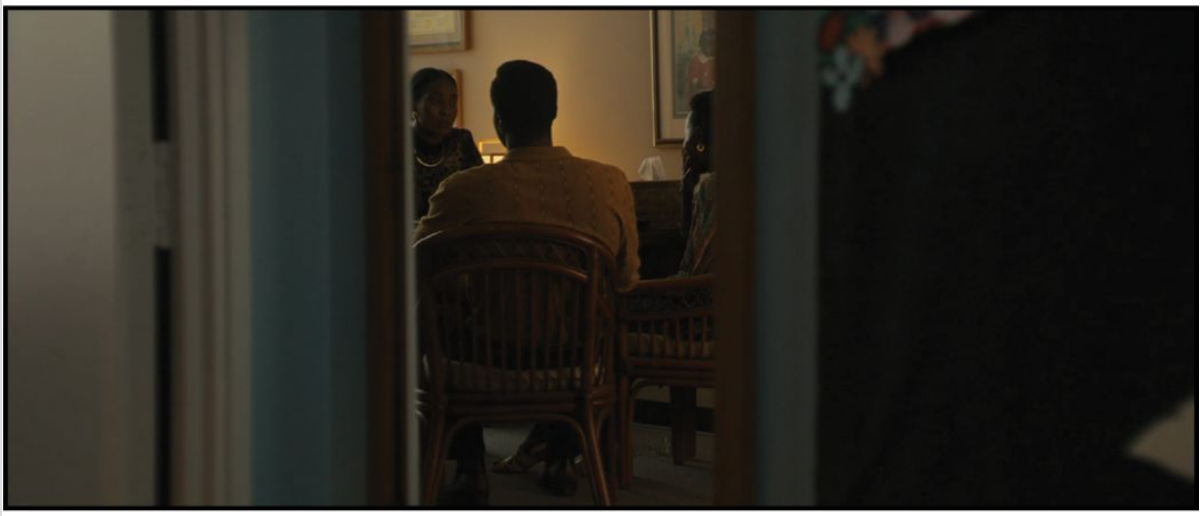
Thinking about Film Editing

The editing styles we have discussed so far are not simply neutral ways of telling stories or conveying information. When they are applied in different contexts — Hollywood, art cinema, documentary, or the avant-garde — editing styles convey different perspectives. Cutting to a close-up in a silent film such as *The Cheat* (1912) was an innovative way of smoothly taking the viewer inside the film's world; it served the psychological realism of Hollywood storytelling. Documentary films have developed editing patterns whose logic is made clear by a continuous voiceover narration. Experimental films like *The Flicker* (1965) employ various patterns of alternation or accumulation to generate aesthetic experiences and reveal structural principles like those found in paintings or poetry.

Film editing serves two general aims — to generate emotions and ideas through the construction of patterns of seeing and also to move beyond normal temporal and spatial limitations. In Jordan Peele's *Us* (2019), for instance, we experience the palpable fear and anxiety when a middle-class family sees shadows of themselves appear in their driveway. Only toward the conclusion of the film does the narrative release our perspective from the emotional intensity and mystery of these subjective points of view by shifting to a more objective, exterior point of view that allows both relief and eventually resolution to the family's interior, subjective nightmare.

Through logic and pacing, the editing does more than just link images in space and time; it also generates emotions, thoughts, and, more obliquely, open questions about racial identity and social class **[Figures 5.39a and 5.39b]**.

(a)



(b)

5.39a and 5.39b *Us* (2019). The editing of Jordan Peele's *Us* concentrates on a drama of frightening subjective perspectives that eventually open up on a more politicized and objective social stage.

Description
The first still shows a young girl standing beside a crib and looking straight at the camera. The second still shows, through the door, on the other side of the room two woman and a man, seated at a table, having a conversation.

These potential effects of editing are well illustrated in the legendary editing experiments conducted by Soviet filmmaker Lev Kuleshov in the 1910s and 1920s. A shot of the Russian actor Ivan Mozzhukhin's face followed by a bowl of soup signified "hunger" to viewers, while the identical footage of the face linked to a child's coffin connoted "grief." In the absence of an establishing shot, viewers assumed these pairs of images to be linked in space and time and motivation — the so-called Kuleshov effect.

A magisterial example of how editing overcomes the physical limitations of human perception can be found in *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968). No individual character's consciousness anchors the film's journey through space and time. Instead, our experience of the film is governed largely by the film's editing — long-shot images that show crew members floating outside the spaceship, accompanied by Johann Strauss's *The Blue Danube* waltz, and a montage of psychedelic patterns that erases all temporal borders. Our almost visceral response to these sequences is a result of the cinema's ability to defy our perceptual limits.

FILM IN FOCUS Patterns of Editing in *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967)

See also: *Midnight Cowboy* (1969); *Fight Club* (1999)

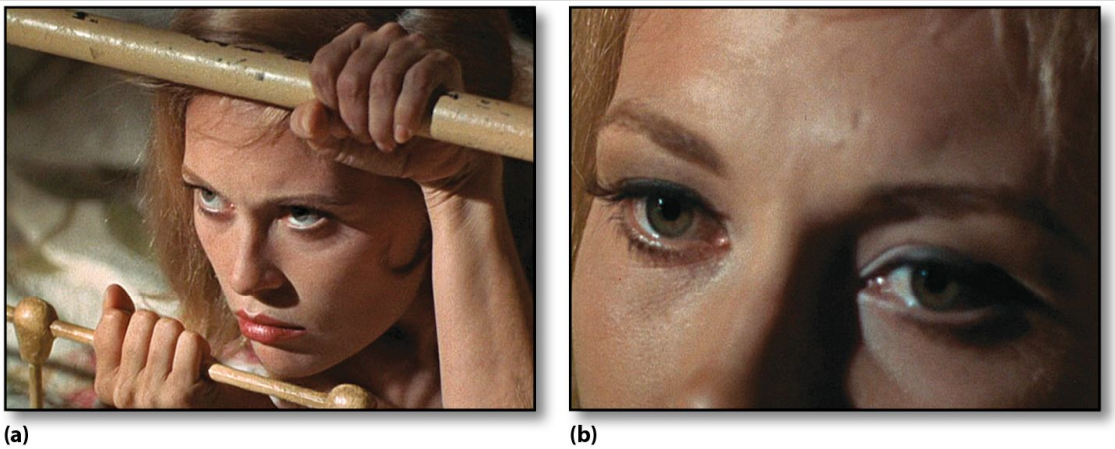
To watch a video showcasing the editing of *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967), go to LaunchPad for *The Film Experience* at **launchpadworks.com**

Arthur Penn's *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967) represented a new kind of American filmmaking in the late 1960s, in part because its complex spatial and temporal patterns of editing departed from established norms. Based on the story of two famous outlaws from the 1930s, the film describes the meeting of the title characters and their violent but clownish crime wave through the Depression-era South. As their escapades continue, they are naively surprised by their notoriety. Soon the gaiety of their adventures gives way to bloodier and darker encounters: Clyde's accomplice/brother is killed, and eventually the couple is betrayed and slaughtered.

Frequently, Dede Allen's editing of scenes emphasizes temporal and spatial realism. The scene depicting the outlaw couple's first small-town bank robbery begins with a long shot of a car outside the bank. The next shot, from inside the bank, shows the car parked outside the window. Spatially, this constructs the geography of the scene; temporally, it conveys the action that takes place within these linked shots. The scene creates verisimilitude.

At other points in *Bonnie and Clyde*, the logic of the editing emphasizes psychological or emotional effects over realism. When Bonnie (Faye Dunaway) is introduced, for example, the first image we see of her is an extreme close-up of her lips; the camera pulls back as she turns right to look in a mirror. This is followed by a cut on action as she stands and looks back over her shoulder to the left in a

medium shot and then by another cut on action as she drops to her bed, her face visible in a close-up through the bedframe, which she petulantly punches. Here Bonnie's restless movements are depicted by a series of jerky shots, and through the editing, we sense her boredom and frustration with small-town life **[Figures 5.40a and 5.40b]**.



5.40a and 5.40b ***Bonnie and Clyde*** (1967). The lack of an establishing shot combines with the multiple framings to emphasize the claustrophobic mise-en-scène, taking us right into the character's psychologically rendered space.

Description
The first still shows a close up of a female character holding the steel headboard of a bed and looking numb. The second still shows the close-up of her eyes.

Next, Bonnie goes to her window and, in a point-of-view construction, spots a strange man near her mother's car. She comes downstairs to find out what he is doing, and her conversation with Clyde (Warren Beatty) is handled in a series of shot/reverse shots, starting with long shots as she comes outside and proceeding to closer pairs of shots. The two-shot of the characters together is delayed. The way this introduction is handled emphasizes the inevitability of their pairing.

The final scene is the film's most famous and influential, and the strategies used serve as an instructive summary of the patterns and logic of editing. Accompanied

by the staccato of machine-gun bullets, Bonnie's and Clyde's deaths are filmed in slow motion, their bodies reacting with almost balletic grace to the gunshots and to the rhythm of the film's shots, which are almost as numerous. In nearly thirty cuts in approximately forty seconds, the film alternates between the two victims' spasms and the reestablishing shots of the death scene. Clyde's fall to the ground is split into three shots, overlapping the action **[Figures 5.41a–5.41c]**. The hail of bullets finally stops, and the film's final minute is composed of a series of seven shots of the police and other onlookers gathering around, without a single reverse shot of what they are seeing. One of the more creative and troubling dimensions of the film is the striking combination of slow, romantic scenes and fast-paced action sequences, which culminate in this memorable finale.

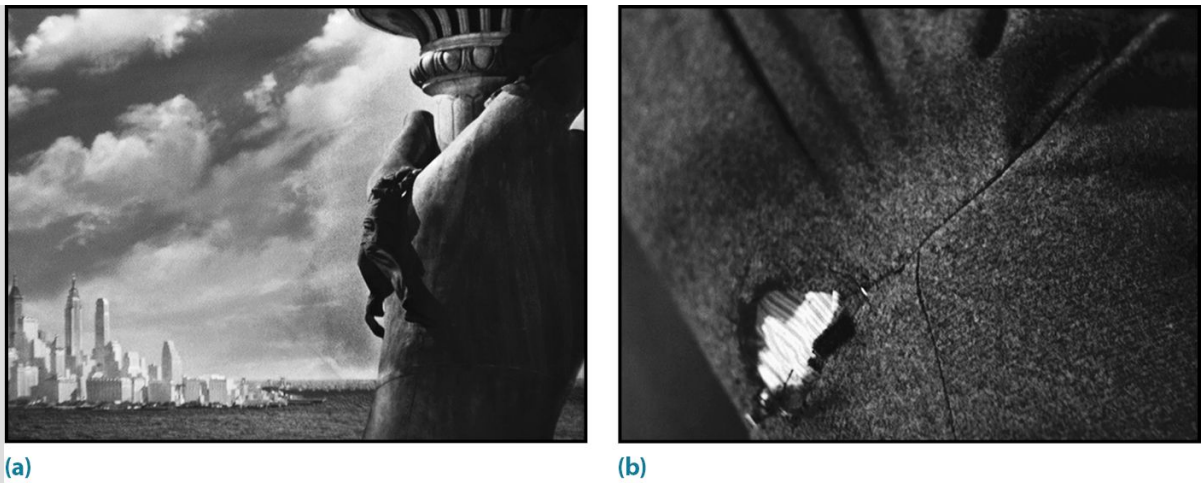
5.41a–5.41c ***Bonnie and Clyde*** (1967). Clyde's famous death sequence uses slow-motion cinematography, cutting on movement, and overlapping editing.

Description
The first still shows a male character getting shot at. The subsequent still shows him trying to crawl on the ground as he gets shot. The third still show his lying dead on the ground; he has bullet holes all over his body.

For linking sex with violence, glamorizing its protagonists through beauty and fashion, and addressing itself to the antiauthoritarian feelings of young audiences, *Bonnie and Clyde* is among the most important U.S. films of the 1960s. Together with other countercultural milestones such as *The Graduate* (1967) and *Easy Rider* (1969), it heralded the end of studio-style production and the beginning of a new youth-oriented film market that revisited film genres of the past with a modern sensibility. However, as we have seen, it was not only the film's content that was innovative. *Bonnie and Clyde*'s editing and the climactic linkage of gunshots with camera shots also influenced viewers — from filmmakers to the American public.

Editing as a Subjective Experience or as an Objective Perspective

These two aims of film editing often overlap. The abstract images in *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968) make us think about the boundaries of humanity and the vastness of the universe — and perhaps about cinema as a manipulation of images in space and time. Many of Alfred Hitchcock's climactic sequences generate emotions of suspense — achieved in *Saboteur* (1942) by suspending a character from the Statue of Liberty **[Figures 5.42a and 5.42b]**. The scene also transcends the confines of perception by showing us details that would be impossible to see without the aid of the movie camera.



5.42a and 5.42b *Saboteur* (1942). Suspense is made literal — and visceral — as a man's fate hangs by a thread.

Description
The first still shows a man climbing up the hand of the draped lady holding a torch statue. The second still shows a close-up of a pant tearing up.

Our responses to such editing patterns are never guaranteed. We may feel emotionally manipulated by a cut to a close-up or cheated by a cutaway. Additionally, across historical periods and in different cultures, editing styles can seem vastly different, and audience expectations vary accordingly. In a song-and-dance sequence from the Hindi film hit *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge* (*The Big Hearted Will Take the Bride*) (1995), the editing uses flashbacks and costume changes on match cuts to highlight the central couple's predestined romance **[Figures 5.43a and 5.43b]**. Audiences familiar with the conventions accept these ruptures in time and space; those less

familiar may be surprised with the return to verisimilitude after the number.

5.43a and 5.43b ***Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge (The Big Hearted Will Take the Bride)*** (1995). Editing transcends time and space within the film's song-and-dance sequences and resumes continuity as the narrative moves forward.

Description
Still (a), shows a young woman and a man standing by the side of a river. The woman holds out the right hand with the palm facing downward.

Still (b), shows the close-up shot of the woman smiling as her hand his held by an individual not in the frame.

Primary Traditions in Editing Practices: Continuity, Disjunctions, and Convergences

As we have noted, continuity editing is so pervasive in narrative film and television that its basic tenets read as "rules." These include

invisible editing, the 180-degree rule, shot/reverse-shot exchanges, and matches on action (see Continuity Style earlier in this chapter).

Since the first uses of editing in the early twentieth century, however, continuity rules have been paralleled and sometimes directly challenged by various alternative practices **[Figures 5.44a and 5.44b]**. Here we refer to these practices collectively as *disjunctive editing* to distinguish these styles from continuity editing and to illuminate historical, cultural, and philosophical differences in editing styles. These traditions are not unified, however, and in modern filmmaking, multiple editing methods sometimes converge in the editing style of a single film.

(a) (b)

5.44a and 5.44b ***Plan 9 from Outer Space*** (1959). The principles of continuity editing are illustrated by their failed execution in a film by notorious B filmmaker Edward D. Wood Jr. When actor Bela Lugosi died before filming was complete on this low-budget sci-fi horror film, the director replaced him with another actor in a cape. Clearly, props alone do not create continuity.

Description
The first still shows a male character in a graveyard. The second still shows a character wearing a cape covering his nose and mouth.

Disjunctive editing is visible editing. It calls attention to the cut through spatial tension, temporal jumps, or rhythmic or graphic patterns and therefore makes a definitive break from cutting in the service of verisimilitude. Alternative editing practices based on oppositional relationships or other formal constructions can be traced back to early developments in film syntax in various countries and schools excited about the possibilities of film art. These practices confront viewers with juxtapositions and linkages that seem unnatural or unexpected with two main purposes — to call attention to the editing for aesthetic, conceptual, ideological, or psychological purposes and to disorient, disturb, or affect viewers viscerally.

When viewers notice a particular cut or cutting pattern because it is jarring, they may be led to reflect on its meaning or effect. Disjunctive editing is prominent in avant-garde and political film traditions, and some theorists argue that it leads the viewer to develop a critical perspective on the medium, the film's subject matter, or the process of representation itself. Other effects of disjunctive editing patterns may be more physical than rational. Editing may be organized around any number of different aspects,

such as spatial tension, temporal experimentation, or rhythmic and graphic patterns.

One technique that is used many different ways in disjunctive editing is the *jump cut* — a cut that interrupts a particular action and intentionally or unintentionally creates discontinuities in the spatial or temporal development of shots. Used loosely, the term *jump cut* can identify several different disjunctive practices. Cutting a section out of the middle of a shot causes a jump ahead to a later point in the action. Sometimes the background of a shot may remain constant while figures shift position inexplicably. Two shots from the same angle but from different distances also create a jump when juxtaposed. Although such jumps are considered grave errors in continuity editing, as noted previously, they were reintroduced into the editing vocabulary of narrative films by the French New Wave, notably Jean-Luc Godard's *Breathless* (1960). Jump cuts gave Godard's gangster narrative an outlaw energy. Contemporary films such as *The Big Short* (2015) have appropriated this technique to allow viewers to experience the disorientation and, in this case, the frightening lack of logic that propelled the 2008 housing market collapse **[Figures 5.45a and 5.45b]**.

(a)

(b)

5.45a and 5.45b *The Big Short* (2015). Hollywood films have increasingly appropriated jump cuts. Here, shots of Steve Carell's character convey his distracted state.

Description

The first still shows the male protagonist walking on the sidewalk preoccupied with his cell phone. A man boards a cab behind him. The second still shows the character stills holds his phone in his right hand and looking dead ahead distractedly.

Jump cuts illustrate the two primary aims of disjunctive editing. In Wong Kar-wai's *Happy Together* (1997), they contribute to the film's overall stylization. Jumps in distance and time are combined with changes in film stock within a supposedly continuous scene **[Figures 5.46a and 5.46b]**. Rather than simply taking in the action, the viewer notices *how* the action is depicted. The viewer may reflect on how the disjointed shots convey the characters' restless yet stagnant moods, recognize in them the film's theme of displacement, or appreciate the aesthetic effect for its own sake.

(a) (b)

5.46a and 5.46b *Happy Together* (1997). Here jump cuts draw attention to the restlessness and displacement of two men who have moved from Hong Kong to Buenos Aires.

Description
The first still shows a man with a parcel knocking on a door. The second still shows a man delivering a parcel directly to a person.

The jump cuts in Alain Resnais's *Last Year at Marienbad* (1961) are a central device that the film uses to play with space and especially time. The major conceit of this classic art film is the characters'

different versions of the past. The protagonist (known only as X) insists that he met the heroine (A) at the same hotel one year before, and she denies it. This difference in point of view relates to the viewer's disorientation through editing. Numerous images show the female protagonist striking poses around the hotel and gardens **[Figures 5.47a and 5.47b]**. The temporal relationship among such shots is unclear (are they happening now, are they flashbacks, or are they X's version of events?), and differences in costume and setting are countered by similarities in posture and styling. Finally, the editing strategy becomes a reflection on the process of viewing a film. How can we assume that the action we are viewing is happening now, when recording, editing, projection, and viewing are all distinct temporal operations?

(a) (b)

5.47a and 5.47b ***Last Year at Marienbad*** (1961). Delphine Seyrig strikes poses against various backgrounds, challenging our perception of time and place in the narrative and in cinematic viewing more generally. The technique was later adopted in music videos.

Description

The first still shows the female protagonist standing against the railing of a balcony with her hands resting on it. The balcony overlooks a pathway

with manicured gardens on either side. The second still shows the protagonist standing in the middle of a huge room, wearing a white dress and a pair of stilettos, striking a pose.

One principle behind the use of disjunctive edits like jump cuts for some filmmakers is the concept of **distanciation** introduced by German playwright Bertolt Brecht in his plays and critical writings of the 1920s. This artistic practice is intended to create an intellectual distance between the viewer and the work of art in order to reflect on the work's production or the various ideas and issues that it raises. When viewers are made aware of how the work is put together, they are encouraged to think as well as to feel. In *Two or Three Things I Know About Her* (1967), Jean-Luc Godard uses nondiegetic inserts (like numbered chapter headings, printed text, and advertising images) as distanciation devices. Recall that, strictly speaking, the word *montage* simply means "editing." As noted previously, the most important tradition in disjunctive editing is the Soviet theory of montage, which aims to grab viewers' attention through the collision between shots (see "1919–1929: Soviet Montage" earlier in this chapter). As some of the techniques used by the Soviets were adapted elsewhere, the term **montage sequence** came to denote a series of thematically linked shots or shots meant to show the passage of time, joined by quick cuts or other devices, such as dissolves, wipes, and superimpositions. In studio-era Hollywood, the Soviet émigré Slavko Vorkapich specialized in

creating memorable montage sequences such as the earthquake in *San Francisco* (1936) **[Figures 5.48a–5.48c]**.

5.48a–5.48c *San Francisco* (1936). Although continuity editing was the norm in studio-era Hollywood, montage sequences were created for special purposes, such as this spectacular earthquake scene.

Description

The first still shows parts of a building crumbing down and creating a cloud of smoke; a man in the same building leans out of the window of his apartment. The second still shows the remains of a building including

the piano that is fallen over. The scene is hazy and lightly grainy. The third still shows a little girl crying as she looks upward.

Today the term *montage* is used to emphasize the creative power of editing — especially the potential to build up a sequence and augment meaning — rather than simply the removal of the extraneous (as the term *cutting* implies). This principle of construction is behind abstract and animated films and videos that convey visual patterns through their editing (examples of which are explored in Chapter 9). It also informs films made from found footage, which date back at least to montage experiments like *The Fall of the Romanov Dynasty* (1927), cut from existing footage by Soviet filmmaker Esfir Shub when film stock was in short supply. One of the first explorations of the overabundance of images that saturated postwar consumer culture, Bruce Conner's *A Movie* (1958) is a rapid montage that creates humorous, sinister, and thought-provoking relationships among images culled from newsreels, pinups, war movies, and Hollywood epics. The introduction of consumer videos in the 1980s made the editing of found footage and the use of video effects accessible to artists as well as amateurs. Cecilia Barriga's low-budget analog video art piece *Meeting of Two Queens* (1991) is ingeniously constructed by recutting brief clips from the films of Hollywood icons Greta Garbo and Marlene Dietrich. The resulting video suggests a romance between the two by using viewers' expectations of continuity editing and altering mise-en-scène through superimposition.

Converging Editing Styles

Does the editing of the film you've just viewed for class call attention to itself in a disjunctive fashion, setting up conflicts or posing oppositional values? If so, how and to what end?

Given the influence of other traditions and styles, editing in mainstream films arguably no longer strives for invisibility. Certainly, it is no longer possible (if it ever was) to assign specific responses, such as passive acceptance or political awareness, to specific editing techniques.

Digital technology has revolutionized the craft and language of editing. Using footage from one hundred small digital video cameras, Lars von Trier in *Dancer in the Dark* (2000) breaks down actions much more minutely than through standard editing, and the arbitrariness of the cutting becomes apparent rather than remaining hidden. As the two formal traditions of continuity and disjunctive editing converge, the values associated with each tradition become less distinct. For Eisenstein, calling attention to the editing was important because it could change the viewers' consciousness. For contemporary filmmakers, omitting establishing shots, breaking the 180-degree rule, and using rapid montage may serve primarily to establish a stylish, eye-catching look.

Editing is perhaps the most distinctive feature of film form. Editing leads viewers to experience images viscerally and emotionally, and it remains one of the most effective ways to create meanings from shots. These interpretations can vary — from the almost automatic inferences about space, time, and narrative that we draw from the more familiar continuity editing patterns to the intellectual puzzles posed by the unfamiliar spatial and temporal juxtapositions of disjunctive editing practices.

Chapter 5 Review

SUMMARY

- **Editing** is the process of combining shots into scenes and sequences.
- Editing technology and practices have changed significantly over time.
    - Director D. W. Griffith helped pioneer the technique of **crosscutting** (also called **parallel editing**), which involves alternating between multiple strands of simultaneous narrative action.
    - **Montage** refers to a theory of editing that emphasizes the breaks and contrasts between images joined by a cut. It is closely associated with Soviet filmmaker Sergei Eisenstein.
    - The introduction of sound technology in the late 1920s solidified Hollywood's commitment to **continuity editing** (also called invisible editing), an approach that emphasizes spatial and temporal clarity to establish **verisimilitude**.
    - Beginning in the 1940s, cinematic realism was established as one of the primary aesthetic principles in film editing, influenced in part by Italian neorealism and documentary films. Around the same time, alternative editing styles emerged, including various forms of disjunctive editing, such as **jump cuts**.

    - From the 1990s to the present, digital editing has allowed editors freedom to manipulate and combine images in new ways. Editing in Hollywood films has become increasingly fast paced.
- Editing involves decisions about which shots to include, the most effective take of each shot, the arrangement and duration of shots, and the transitions between them.
    - A **cut** describes the break that links two different pieces of film and separates two shots.
    - Other types of editing transitions between shots — known as optical effects — include **fade-outs, fade-ins, dissolves** , the iris, and **wipes**.
    - An **establishing shot** is an initial long shot that establishes the setting and orients the viewer in space to a clear view of the action.
        - The **180-degree rule** is a conventional rule of continuity editing in which the camera must film the action of a scene from one side of an imaginary line called the **axis of action**.
        - The **30-degree rule** specifies that a shot should be followed only by another shot taken from a position greater than 30 degrees from that of the first.
    - Story chronology can be manipulated through **flashbacks** or, more rarely, **flashforwards**.
        - **Narrative duration** denotes the temporal relation of shots and scenes to the amount of time that passes in the story.

- Editing styles convey different perspectives on art and realism. **Disjunctive editing** confronts the viewer by calling attention to the editing for aesthetic, conceptual, ideological, or psychological purposes.

KEY TERMS

editing
storyboard
cut
crosscutting
parallel editing
montage
dialectical montage
intercutting
continuity editing
jump cut
shock cut
fade-out
fade-in
dissolve
wipe
verisimilitude
continuity style
establishing shot
two-shot
over-the-shoulder shot
reestablishing shot

insert
180-degree rule
axis of action
30-degree rule
shot/reverse shot
eyeline match
match on action
graphic match
reaction shot
story time
plot time
screen time
chronology
flashback
narrative frequency
flashforward
narrative duration
ellipsis
cutaway
overlapping editing
pace
average shot length
long take
sequence shot
slow cinema
rhythmic editing
scene
sequence

segmentation
disjunctive editing
distanciation
montage sequence

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CHAPTER 6 FILM SOUND
Listening to the Cinema

Pictorial Press Ltd/Alamy

Description

The still shows a woman in a black dress standing on a beach beside a piano. A girl in a white dress sits on the piano.

Jane Campion's 1993 *The Piano* opens with its nineteenth-century heroine Ada McGrath's voiceover: "The voice you hear is not my speaking voice; it is my mind's voice." This is the first indication of the inventive uses to which the film will put sound — for Ada is mute, and we will not hear her "mind's voice" again until the film's final moments. She is about to emigrate from Scotland to New Zealand to marry a man whom she has never met, and the grand piano that she takes with her becomes her primary means of expression. Even when Ada is forced to leave the piano on the beach where she lands because it is too large to transport, the film's soundtrack acts as a link between her and the piano, as Michael Nyman's score shifts from Ada playing to the film's soundtrack. Later the piano becomes an instrument of exchange and erotic expression, when she must barter for its return from the man who buys it from her husband. *The Piano* recognizes from the start that film sound does not simply play a supporting role and is not restricted to human speech. Rather, film sound — as dialogue, music, and sound effects — can create a drama as complex as mise-en-scène, cinematography, or editing.

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Cinema is an audiovisual medium, one among many that saturate our contemporary media experience. Many of the visual

technologies we encounter in daily life are also sound technologies: you choose your smartphone's ringtone, battle villains to the soundtrack of your favorite video game, or notice that your television's volume soars when a commercial interrupts a program. These devices use sound to encourage and guide interaction, to complement visual information, and to give rhythm and dimension to the experience. Cinema works similarly, using complex combinations of voice, music, and sound effects. Too often given secondary status, sound engages viewers perceptually, provides key spatial and story information, and affords an aesthetic experience of its own.

Sound is a sensual experience that in some cases makes an even deeper impression than a film's visuals. Viewers might cover their eyes during the infamous shower scene in *Psycho* (1960), but to lessen the scene's horror, they would have to escape from the shrieking violins that punctuate each thrust of the knife. To perceive an image, we must face forward with our eyes open, but sound can come from any direction. Listening to movies, just as much as watching them, defines the filmgoing experience, and advanced technologies have helped to make the sound experience more immersive than ever before. This chapter explores how speech, music, and sound effects are used in cinema and how they are perceived by a film's audience.

KEY OBJECTIVES

- Explain the various ways sound is important to the film experience.
- Describe how the use and understanding of sound reflect different historical and cultural influences.
- Explain how sounds convey meaning in relation to images.
- Summarize how sounds are recorded, combined, and reproduced.
- Detail the various functions of voice in film.
- Describe the principles and practices that govern the use of music.
- Outline the principles and practices that govern the use of sound effects.
- Analyze the cultural, historical, and aesthetic values that determine relationships between sounds and images.

A Short History of Film Sound

The history of film sound might appear to begin with the talkies at the end of the 1920s, but in fact both the technical advances necessary to the invention of the cinema and its roots in other storytelling and entertainment practices are as tied to sound as they are to image. "Silent" films were accompanied by live music, sound effects, and human voices, and at most key moments of technological change, sound innovations paralleled advances in imaging.

Prehistories of Film Sound

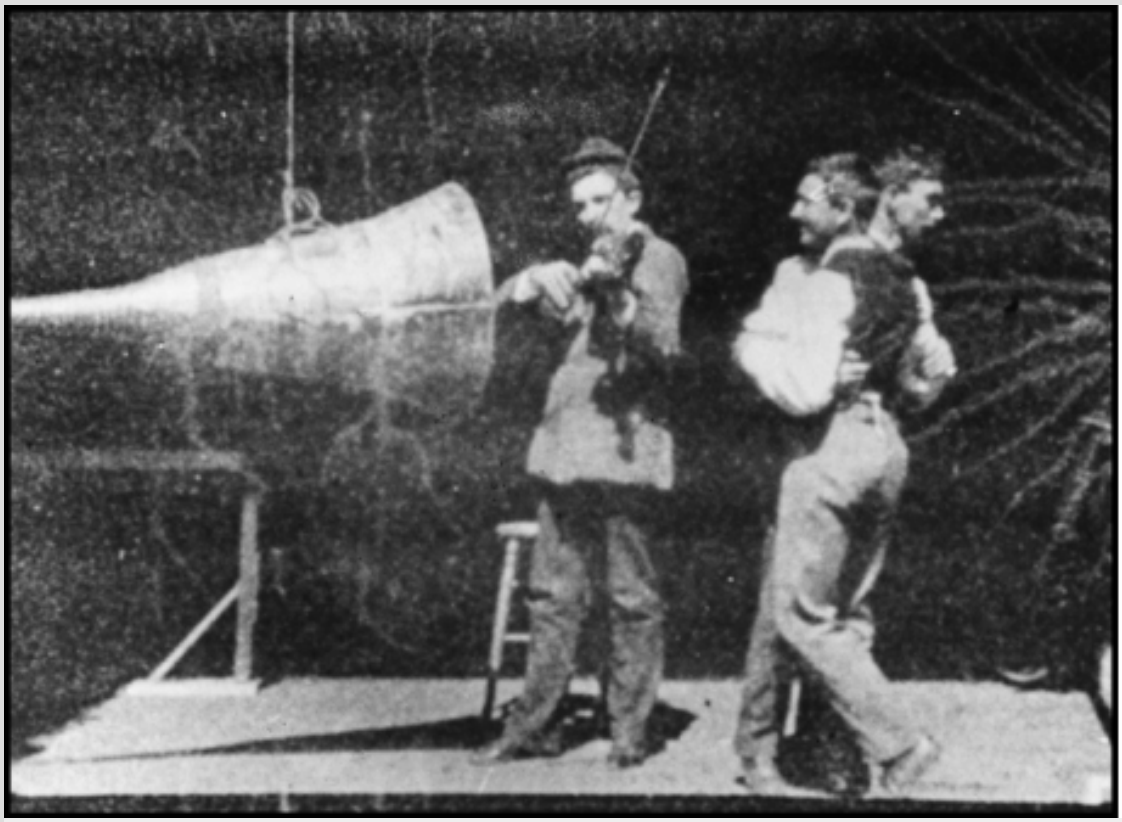
The central role played by music in cinema arises from its theatrical predecessors. The practice of combining music with forms of visual spectacle in the Western tradition goes back at least as far as choral odes in classical Greek theater. Perhaps most relevant to the use of sound in early cinema is the tradition of stage **melodrama** — a sensational narrative whose clearly identifiable moral types, coincidences, and reversals of fortune are dramatized by music. In eighteenth-century France, the word *mélodrame* designated a theatrical genre that combined spoken text with music. In England, plays with music provided popular theatrical spectacles during a time when laws restricted "legitimate" theater to particular venues. Stage melodrama dominated the nineteenth-century American

stage; its influence is seen in silent films like D. W. Griffith's *Way Down East* (1920), an adaptation of a successful play.

In addition to music, cinematic predecessors such as magic lantern shows and travel lectures used sound effects and narration as aural accompaniment. As far back as the late eighteenth century, inventors were engaged in the problems of sound reproduction. Thomas Edison's introduction of the phonograph in 1877 greatly expanded the public's taste for technologically mediated entertainment; his laboratory developed film technology within a few decades.

1895–1920s: The Sounds of Silent Cinema

The dream of joining image and sound haunted the medium from its inception. Edison was a primary figure in the invention of the motion-picture apparatus, and one of the first films made by his studios in 1895 is a sound experiment in which Edison's chief inventor, W. K. L. Dickson, plays a violin into a megaphone as two other employees dance **[Figure 6.1]**. Sound cylinders provided a way of synchronizing image and sound very early in film history, and inventors continued to experiment with means of providing simultaneous picture and sound throughout the silent film era.

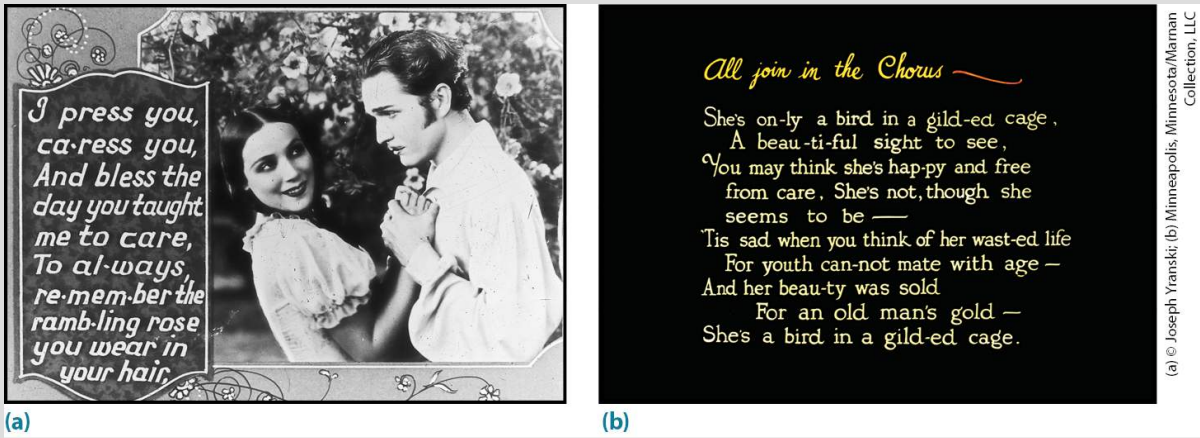


William Kennedy-Laurie Dickson/Library of Congress Motion Picture, Broadcasting and Recorded Sound Division [00694117]

6.1 ***Dickson Experimental Sound Film*** (1894–5). The first film with live sound recording, made with the Kinetophone system developed by W. K. L. Dickson and Thomas Edison at the Black Maria, Edison's New Jersey studio.

But before the successful development and widespread showing of films with synchronized sound, loudspeakers lured customers into film exhibitions that were accompanied by lecturers, pianos, organs, small ensembles, and eventually full orchestras. The so-called silent cinema used sound very intentionally. Often sound effects were supplied by someone standing behind the screen or by specially designed machines. Occasionally, actors even provided dialogue to go along with the picture. Moreover, in nickelodeons and other movie venues, audiences themselves customarily made noise,

joining in sing-alongs between films [Figures 6.2a and 6.2b] and talking back to the screen.



(a) © Joseph Yranski; (b) Minneapolis, Minnesota/Marman Collection, LLC

6.2a and 6.2b Early nickelodeon slides. From 1905 to 1915, films were interspersed with sing-alongs, and slides like these provided the lyrics for an interactive experience.

Description

The slide (a) shows a romantic scene between a man and a woman which features a sing-along that reads,"I press you, ca-ress you, And bless the day you taught me to care, To al-ways re-mem-ber the ramb-ling rose you wear in your hair."

The slide (b) titled"all join in the chorus" shows the following lyrics.

"She's on-ly a bird in a gild-ed cage,

A beau-ti-ful sight to see,

You may think she's hap-py and free

from care, She's not, though she

seems to be—

'Tis sad when you think of her wast-ed life

> For youth can-not mate with age—
>
> And her beau-ty was sold
>
> For an old man's gold—
>
> She's a bird in a gild-ed cage."

From the music halls in Great Britain to vaudeville theaters in the United States, early cinema borrowed popular talent, proven material, formats (such as the revue), and audiences that had specific expectations about sound and spectacle. Because of the preexisting popularity of minstrel shows and vaudeville, African American and Jewish voices were heard in cinema when they might otherwise have been excluded from entertainment directed at mass audiences. For his sound film debut at MGM, director King Vidor chose to make *Hallelujah!* (1929), a musical with an all-black cast, capitalizing on the cultural associations of African Americans with the expressive use of song **[Figure 6.3]**. Both musical performers and stage performers with vocal training and experience were now in demand in Hollywood, and they soon displaced many of the silent screen's most beloved stars.

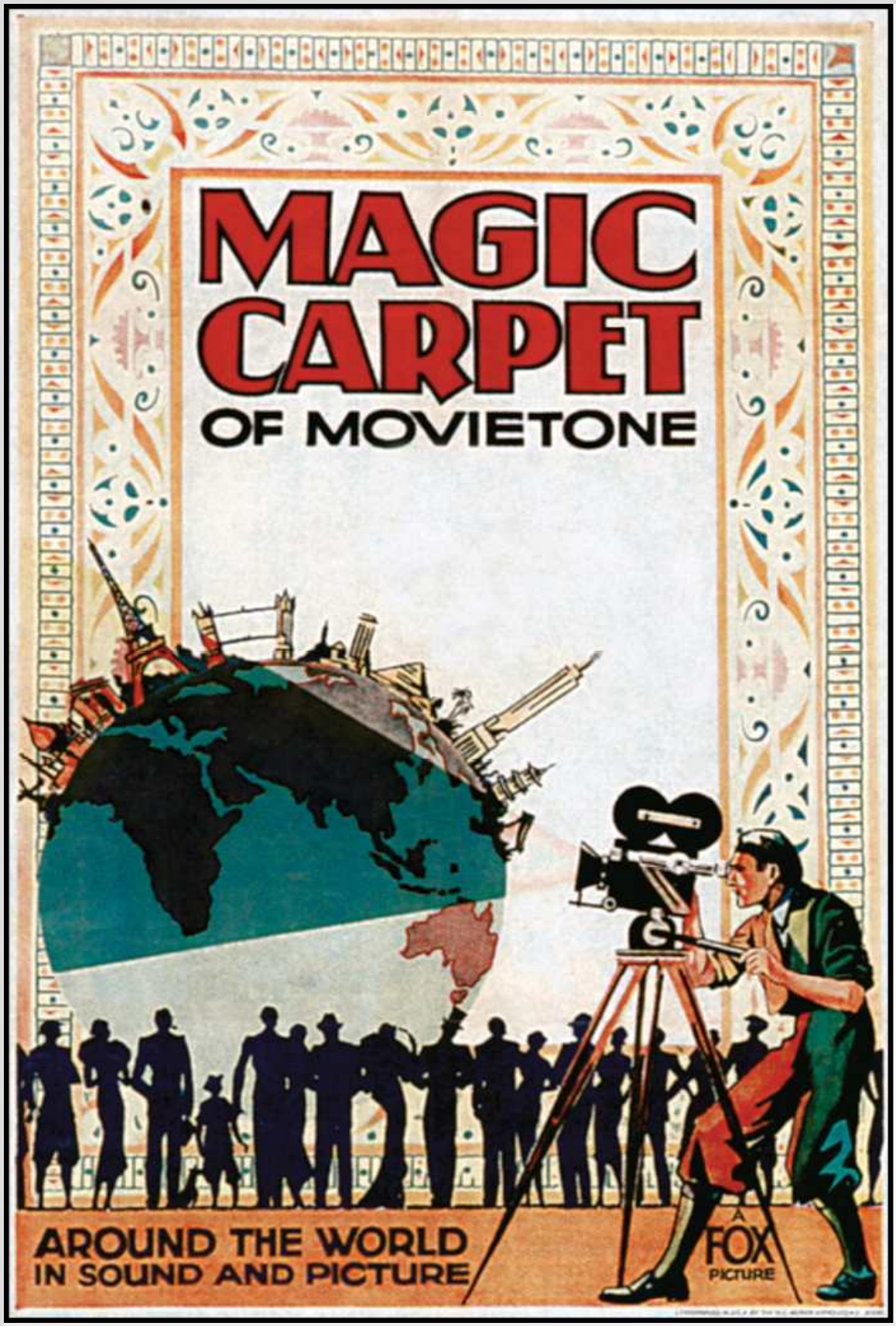
6.3 ***Hallelujah!*** (1929). With the coming of sound, musicals abounded, from backstage musicals to King Vidor's film, shot on location and highlighting an all-black cast.

1927–1930: Transition to Synchronized Sound

No event in the history of Hollywood film was as transformative as the rapid incorporation of synchronized sound in the period from 1927 to 1930. Many dynamics were at work in the introduction of sound, including the relationship of cinema to radio, theater, and vaudeville, the economic position of the industry as the United

States headed into the Great Depression, and the popularity of certain film genres and stars. Yet exhibitors needed to be convinced to adopt the relatively untested new technology. Considerable expense was involved in converting a sufficient number of theaters to make the production of sound films feasible, and the studios had to be willing to make the investment.

In 1926 and 1927, two studios actively pursued competing sound technologies. Warner Bros. aggressively invested in sound and, in 1926, premiered its Vitaphone sound-on-disc system with a program of shorts, a recorded speech by Hollywood censor Will H. Hays, and the first feature film with a recorded score, *Don Juan*. Fox developed the Movietone sound system, which recorded sound optically on film. In 1928, Fox introduced its popular Movietone newsreels, which depicted everything from ordinary street scenes to exciting news (aviator Charles Lindbergh's takeoff for Paris was the first use of sound for a news item) and were soon playing in Fox's many theaters nationwide **[Figure 6.4]**. The new technology became impossible to ignore when it branched out from musical accompaniment and sound effects to include synchronous dialogue. Public response was enthusiastic.



© 20th Century Fox Film Corp. All rights reserved./courtesy Everett Collection

6.4 Ad for the Fox Movietone Magic Carpet series in the exhibitor's journal *Motion Picture Herald* (1934). Fox Studios' theater holdings were equipped to show newsreels made with the studio's optical sound-recording technology. The newsreels ran from 1928 to 1963 in the United States.

Description
An audience of silhouetted people stand in the background in front of the projected image. Text at the bottom left of the poster reads,"Around the World in Sound and Picture." The bottom right reads,"A Fox Picture."

Talking pictures, or "talkies," were an instant popular phenomenon. *The Jazz Singer*, Warner Bros.' second feature film with recorded sound, released in October 1927, is credited with convincing exhibitors, critics, studios, and the public that there was no turning back. Starring vaudevillian Al Jolson — the country's most popular entertainer of the time, who frequently performed in blackface — the film tells a story, similar to Jolson's own, of a singer who must turn his back on his Jewish roots and the legacy of his father, a cantor in a synagogue, in order to fulfill his show-business dreams. Jolson introduces dialogue to the movies with a famous promise that came true soon thereafter: "You ain't heard nothing yet!" **[Figure 6.5]**. In the wake of *The Jazz Singer*'s remarkable success, the studios came together and signed with Western Electric (a subsidiary of AT&T) to adopt a sound-on-film system in place of the less flexible Vitaphone sound-on-disc process. The studios also invested in converting their major theaters and in acquiring new chains to show sound films.

6.5 ***The Jazz Singer*** (1927). Warner Bros.' Vitaphone sound-on-disc system became a sensation because of Al Jolson's singing and spontaneous dialogue.

1930s–1940s: Challenges and Innovations in Cinema Sound

The transition to sound was not entirely smooth. The troubles with exhibition technology were more than matched by the difficulties posed by cumbersome sound-recording technology. Despite such problems, the transition was extremely rapid. By 1930, silent films were no longer being produced by the major studios, and only a few

independent filmmakers, such as Charlie Chaplin, whose art grew from the silent medium, held out.

The ability of early films to cross national borders and be understood regardless of the local language, a much-celebrated property of the early medium, was also changed irrevocably by the addition of spoken dialogue in a specific language. Film industries outside the United States acquired national specificity, and Hollywood set up European production facilities. Exports were affected by conversion-standard problems and patent disputes. For a time, films were made simultaneously in different languages. Marlene Dietrich became an international star in *The Blue Angel* (1930), produced in Germany in French, English, and German versions.

By this period, the Radio Corporation of America had entered the motion-picture production business, joining with the Keith-Albee-Orpheum chain of vaudeville theaters. The new studio, RKO Radio Pictures, quickly became one of five studios known as the "majors" that dominated sound-era cinema. The score for RKO's *King Kong* (1933) was prolific composer Max Steiner's breakthrough. Also made at RKO, *Citizen Kane* (1941) was more adventurous in its use of sound, befitting Orson Welles's background in radio. The establishment of norms in sound recording and mixing practices such as continuous scoring and the precedence of dialogue over other sounds proceeded rapidly after the introduction of sound.

1950s–1980s: From Stereophonic to Dolby Sound

The postwar period saw new attention being paid to the qualities and varieties of sound. Magnetic tape replaced the optical soundtrack as a recording medium, bringing greater clarity as well as new opportunities for creativity and new methods of both recording and mixing. The increased competition with other forms of entertainment including radio, television, and the recording industry encouraged innovations in film sound style and practice. Conventionally orchestral in style, scores began to incorporate jazz and popular music **[Figure 6.6]**. **Stereophonic sound** — the recording, mixing, and playback of sound on multiple channels to create audio perspective — was promoted in the 1950s along with widescreen technologies to lure audiences away from television through an immersive sensory experience at the movies. Spectacles like *The Sound of Music* (1965) were special events when seen and heard in properly equipped movie theaters.

6.6 ***Anatomy of a Murder*** (1959). Jazz became more prevalent in movie music in the 1950s. Duke Ellington and Billy Strayhorn scored Otto Preminger's acclaimed crime drama, in which Ellington made a brief appearance.

In the 1960s and 1970s, portable sound-recording technology helped break out of the studio model, and location sound used in independent cinema became part of the authenticity and artistry of the new Hollywood. Sound designer Walter Murch helped make Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now* (1979) a new kind of sonic experience. Dolby Laboratories turned its attention to making the exhibition experience equal to the quality of film sound production, and its surround sound systems gave the blockbusters of the 1980s their powerful audio impact. The introduction of the MTV cable television channel in 1981 helped producers cross-promote the soundtrack albums for movies with popular music scores.

1990s–Present: Sound in the Digital Era

Changes in sound technologies and practices have corresponded with historical shifts in film's social role, with competition from home video, the expansion of cable, and video games spurring innovations in theatrical and home experiences. Digital sound editing and mixing give sound engineers greater flexibility during production and postproduction, and the sonic style of studio films since the 1990s has become more dense and kinetic **[Figure 6.7]**. Just as in the 1950s, when CinemaScope and stereophonic sound were used to lure customers back to the theaters, digital sound systems today attract audiences to theatrical exhibition. Audiophiles led the companion trend toward home theaters with digital sound systems and speakers configured like those of movie theaters to emulate surround sound. The perpetual quest for better-quality images and sounds confirms that one part of cinema's appeal is its ability to provide a heightened sensory experience that intensifies the ordinary.

6.7 ***Making Waves: The Art of Cinematic Sound*** (2019). In this documentary about the art and technology of film sound, directed by sound editor Midge Costin, sound designers like Gary Rydstrom (pictured here working on *Jurassic Park*, 1993) demonstrate their craft.

Description

The corresponding movie scene is displayed on a large screen in front of him, with a T-rex roaring amidst cars on a street. In front of Gary is an extensive array of sound design devices, on either side of which are a computer and laptop.

The Elements of Film Sound

Sound is fully integrated into the film experience. In fact, one aspect of sound — human speech — is so central to narrative comprehension and viewer identification that we often can follow what happens even when the picture is out of sight. Sounds can interact with images in infinite ways, and strategies that combine the two can affect our understanding of film. In *Dr. Strangelove, or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb* (1964), the song "We'll Meet Again" — a nostalgic 1940s song used to boost troop morale during World War II — accompanies footage of hydrogen bombs dropping and detonating, making it impossible to read these images as noble or tragic. Instead, the song and images frame the film's view of war as dark satire **[Figure 6.8]**.

6.8 ***Dr. Strangelove, or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb*** (1964). An image of aggression set to nostalgic 1940s music sets the film's dark satirical tone.

Sound effects of footsteps to accompany an image of a character walking are not really necessary; such an image is easily interpreted without the accompaniment. However, the sound of footsteps heightens the sense of immediacy and presence. In the next section, we explore the relationship of sound and image and the often unperceived meanings of sound before considering more fully the technology and aesthetics of film sound.

Sound and Image

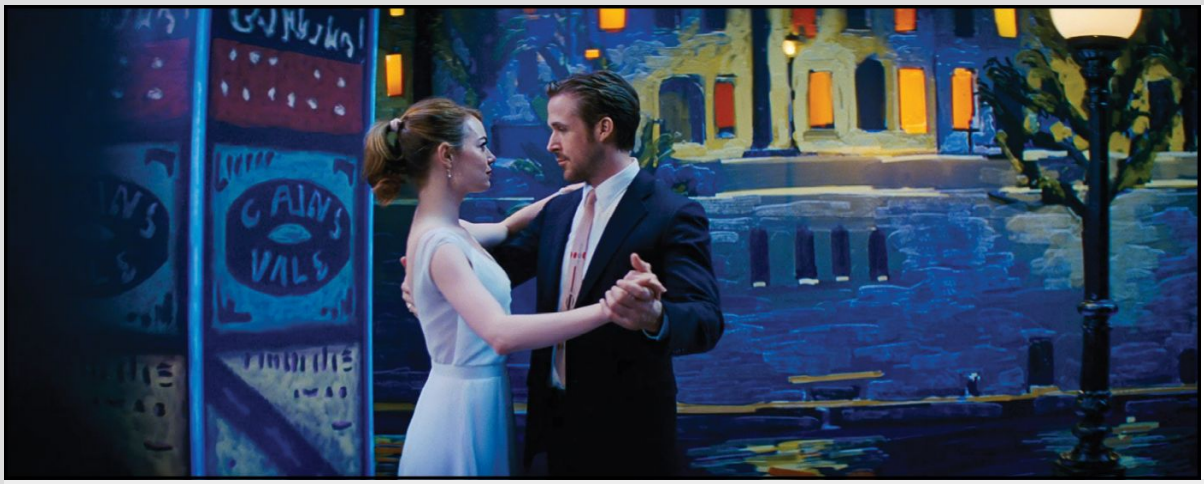
VIEWING CUE

Technologies of watching — and listening to — movies have changed rapidly in recent years. Characterize the audio experience of the last film you watched. How much of this experience was specific to the film's sound design, and how much was related to the format, platform, or venue through which you watched the film?

Any consideration of sound in film entails discussion of the relationship between sounds and images. Some filmmakers, such as the comic actor and writer-director Jacques Tati, have consistently given equal weight to the treatment and meaning of sound in their films. In Tati's *Playtime* (1967), comic gags take place in long shots, while sounds cue us where to look **[Figure 6.9]**. Filmmaker Jacques Demy pursued a vision of film's musicality in films like *The Umbrellas of Cherbourg* (1964), in which all of the dialogue is sung to Michel Legrand's music. *La La Land* (2016) draws extensively from Demy's work, including in its color palette, which complements the sense of heightened experience derived from the music **[Figure 6.10]**. Derek Jarman's *Blue* (1993), made after the filmmaker had lost his vision due to an AIDS-related illness, combines an image track consisting solely of a rich shade of blue with a soundtrack featuring a complex mix of music, effects, and voices reading diaries and dramatic passages. Gazing into a vast blue screen allows viewers to focus more carefully on the soundtrack's ideas and the emotions they evoke.

6.9 ***Playtime*** (1967). Jacques Tati's comic film emphasizes sound as much as image, often cueing the gag through sound effects.

Description
A sign on the nearby wall reads,"Slam your Doors in Golden Silence."



6.10 ***La La Land*** (2016). The score and mise-en-scène of Damien Chazelle's bittersweet romance are in part a tribute to the musical vision of Jacques Demy.

For many filmmakers, however, the function of sound is to enhance the effect of the image. Many possible reasons exist for this secondary status. Film is generally considered to be a predominantly visual medium, following a hierarchy of vision over sound. The artistry of the image track is perceived to be greater because the image is more clearly a conscious rendering of the object being photographed than the recording is of the original sound. Sound also came later in the historical development of cinema. Yet the importance and variety of aural experiences at the movies were great even before the introduction of synchronized soundtracks.

Since the early years of sound cinema, some directors and composers have struggled against a too-literal and too-limited use of sound in film, arguing that the infinite possibilities in image and sound combinations are germane to the medium and its historical development. French filmmaker René Clair feared that the introduction of sound would diminish the visual possibilities of the medium and reduce it to "canned theater." In his musical film *Le Million* (1931), he uses sound in a way that makes it integral to the film. Through scenes of characters and crowds singing songs essential to the plot, Clair demonstrates that sound's potential is more than additive. It transforms the film experience viscerally, aesthetically, and conceptually.

TECHNOLOGY IN ACTION

Sound and Image

Thomas Edison’s role in the invention of both the phonograph and moving-image technology underscores the integral role of sound — with its links to telephony, radio, recorded music, and other communications devices — in the history of cinema. In 1895, Edison marketed a device that he called the Kinetophone, which allowed viewers to listen to music while they watched a short film on his Kinetoscope, an early motion-picture viewing device. Since Edison's time, solutions for combining sound and image have become more sophisticated, ranging from early sound-on-disc systems, to both analog and digital sound-on-film technologies, to digital audio files.

In the early 1920s, engineers at Bell Laboratories and Western Electric developed the first commercially viable technology for synchronizing projected images with sound recorded on a disc. In 1925, the financially shaky Warner Bros. purchased this technology, which they named the Vitaphone system and used for popular features like *Don Juan* (1926) and *The Jazz Singer* (1927). This technology was extraordinarily popular with audiences and forever changed the history of cinemagoing. Around the same time, Fox Films’ prestigious release *Sunrise: A Song of Two Humans* (1927), directed by F. W. Murnau, used the rival Movietone sound system. In the format that eventually was widely adopted in Hollywood and in other film industries, the soundtrack is printed directly on film alongside the image track, resulting in perfectly synchronized sound as the wave form passes an exciter lamp.

6.11a ***Sunrise: A Song of Two Humans*** (1927). 1927 was a monumental year for cinema sound, as several studios released films with groundbreaking sound technologies. Fox's *Sunrise* used Movietone sound, which competed with Warner Bros.' Vitaphone sound system.

Description
The scene shows a man in a meadow, smiling as he lifts a baby into the air. A woman, on their left, sits and smiles as she looks on. A harnessed bullock is on the right.

In the 1950s, studios sought to enhance the cinema sound experience by recording and reproducing high-fidelity stereophonic sound, using two or more independent channels. This new technology made use of magnetic sound systems: in this process, magnetic tape on which a sound signal is stored is bonded to the

filmstrip. In MGM's CinemaScope musical *Silk Stockings* (1957), the characters sing about the spectacular impact of the widescreen technology with its four tracks of magnetic sound.

6.11b *Silk Stockings* (1957). This musical adaptation of *Ninotchka* (1939) draws attention to its use of high-fidelity stereophonic sound in a song lyric.

Audio signals encoded in digital form can be stored on 35mm or 70mm film in a number of ways. Today, however, most commercial theaters project films using Digital Cinema Packages (DCPs) that contain separate image, sound, and metadata files. Warner Bros. equipped a select number of theaters to project the Academy Award–winning *Dunkirk* (2017) in 70mm, and some theaters exhibited the film in 70mm IMAX, but most viewers experienced it through digital projection. While critics debated the differences in image quality between the digital and analog versions, *Dunkirk*'s immersive sound experience (designed by Richard King) and its enveloping score (created by Hans Zimmer in close collaboration with director Christopher Nolan) also varied substantially depending on sound technology.

6.11c ***Dunkirk*** (2017). Viewers' experience of sound in this war film differed depending on whether they saw a digitally projected exhibition or a traditional 35mm or 70mm exhibition.

Synchronous and Asynchronous Sound

VIEWING CUE

Distinguish an example of synchronous sound (with an onscreen source) from an example of asynchronous sound (with an offscreen source) in the film you are studying. Are these sounds easy to distinguish?

Because sound and image always create meaning in conjunction, film theorists attentive to sound have looked for ways to talk about the possibilities of the combination of sound and image. In his book *Theory of Film* (1960), Siegfried Kracauer emphasizes a distinction

between synchronous and asynchronous sound. **Synchronous sound** (also known as *onscreen sound*), whether recorded during a scene or synchronized with the filmed images, has a visible onscreen source, such as when dialogue appears to come directly from the speaker's moving lips. **Asynchronous sound** (also known as *offscreen sound*) is sound that does not have a visible onscreen source. For instance, although most film speech is synchronous, voiceovers are asynchronous because they do not coordinate with the action of the scene. A shot of an alarm clock accompanied by the sound of its ringing is synchronous. An asynchronous knock in a horror film might startle the characters with the threat of an offscreen presence.

Kracauer goes on to differentiate between **parallel sound** (which reinforces the image, such as synchronized dialogue or sound effects, or a voiceover that is consistent with what is displayed onscreen) and **contrapuntal sound** (which contrasts in meaning with the image that is displayed onscreen). In *Kill Bill: Vol. 2* (2004), as The Bride attempts to break out of a sealed coffin, the selections from Ennio Morricone's early scores for spaghetti westerns offer a counterpoint to this horrific situation **[Figure 6.12]**. Soon, the sound of The Bride's fist on the coffin lid, which parallels her methodical punching, combines with the music for heightened effect.

6.12 ***Kill Bill: Vol. 2*** (2004). Spaghetti western music acts as a counterpoint to the horrific images of The Bride punching her way out of a sealed coffin.

The two pairs of terms are distinct from each other and not mutually exclusive. A shot of a teakettle accompanied by a high-pitched whistle is both synchronous and parallel. The teakettle accompanied by an alarm bell would be a synchronous yet contrapuntal use of sound. A voiceover of a nature documentary may explain the behavior of the animals in a parallel use of asynchronous sound. Idyllic images accompanied by a narration stressing the presence of toxins in the environment and an ominous electronic hum would be a contrapuntal use of asynchronous sound.

A familiar example of how relationships between sound and image can achieve multiple meanings comes at the end of *The Wizard of Oz* (1939). The booming voice and sound effects synchronized with the terrifying image of the wizard are suddenly revealed to have been asynchronous sounds produced by an ordinary man behind the curtain. When we see him speaking into a microphone, the sound is in fact synchronous, and what was intended as a parallel is revealed to be a contrapuntal use of sound **[Figure 6.13]**.

6.13 ***The Wizard of Oz*** (1939). The source of the wizard's voice is revealed, interrupting the synchronous effect that frightened the travelers.

Parallelism — the mutual reinforcing or even the redundancy of sound and image — is the norm in Hollywood. For example, a shot of a busy street is accompanied by traffic noises, although viewers immediately understand the locale through the visuals. This parallelism is an aesthetic choice. In contrast, at the dawn of the sound era, Soviet theorists advocated a contrapuntal use of sound to maximize the effects of montage.

Diegetic and Nondiegetic Sound

VIEWING CUE

Watch this clip from *Guardians of the Galaxy* (2014). What would the scene be like without the nondiegetic sound?

One of the most frequently cited and instructive distinctions that is made in sound is between **diegetic sound** (which has its source in the narrative world of film) and **nondiegetic sound** (which does not

have an identifiable source in the characters' world). Materially, the source of film sound is the actual soundtrack that accompanies the image, but diegetic sound implies an onscreen source. **Diegesis** is the world of the film's story (its characters, places, and events), including both what is shown and what is implied to have taken place. The word *diegesis* comes from the Greek word meaning "telling" and is distinguished from *mimesis*, meaning "showing." The implication is that mimetic representations imitate or mimic and diegetic ones use particular devices to tell about or imply events and settings.

One question offers a simple way to distinguish between diegetic and nondiegetic sound: can the characters in the film hear the sound? If not, the sound is likely to be nondiegetic. This distinction can apply to voices, music, and even sound effects. Examples of diegetic sounds include conversations among onscreen characters, the voice of God in *The Ten Commandments* (1956), a voiceover that corresponds to a confession a character is making to the police, and the song "Superfreak" accompanying the little girl's pageant dance routine in *Little Miss Sunshine* (2006) **[Figure 6.14]**. Nondiegetic sounds do not follow rules of verisimilitude. For example, the voiceover narration that tells viewers about the characters in *The Magnificent Ambersons* (1942), background music that accompanies a love scene or journey, or sound effects such as a crash of cymbals when someone takes a comic fall are all nondiegetic. Audio practitioners use the term **source music** to refer to diegetic music,

such as a band performing at a party or characters listening to music on the radio.

6.14 ***Little Miss Sunshine*** (2006). Source music provides the soundtrack in this scene from *Little Miss Sunshine*.

The distinction between diegetic and nondiegetic sounds sometimes can be murky. Certain voiceovers, although not spoken aloud to other characters, can be construed as the thoughts of a character

and thus as arising from the narrative world of the film. Film theorist Christian Metz has classified this as **semidiegetic sound** (it can also be referred to as *internal diegetic sound*). The uncertain status of the dead character's voiceover in *Sunset Boulevard* (1950) is an example. Diegetic music — such as characters singing "Happy Birthday" — is often picked up as a nondiegetic theme in the film's score. Such borderline and mixed cases, rather than frustrating our attempts to categorize, are illustrative of the fluidity and creative possibilities of the soundtrack as well as of the complex devices that shape our experience of a film's spatial and temporal continuity.

In the film **soundtrack** — audio recorded to synchronize with a moving image, including dialogue, music, and sound effects — these three elements often are present simultaneously. In some sense, a film's image track, composed of relatively discrete photographic images and text, is simpler and more unified. Nevertheless, although these three sound elements can all be present and combined in relation to any given image, conventions have evolved governing these relationships. Usually dialogue is audible over music, for example, and only in special cases does a piece of music dictate the images that accompany it. In the following sections, we examine each of the three basic elements of the soundtrack and its potential to make meaning in combination with images and other sounds. We uncover conventional usages of soundtracks and discuss the ways that they have both shaped the film experience and given

direction to theorists' inquiries into the properties and potential of film sound.

FILM IN FOCUS Sound and Image in *Singin' in the Rain* (1952)

See also: *42nd Street* (1933); *Om Shanti Om* (2007); *The Artist* (2011)

To watch a video about sound and image in *Singin' in the Rain* (1952), go to LaunchPad for *The Film Experience* at **launchpadworks.com**

Hollywood has furnished its own myth about the introduction of synchronized sound in *Singin' in the Rain* (1952). Directed by Stanley Donen and Gene Kelly, *Singin' in the Rain* demonstrates an escapist use of sound in film while also being *about* how sound in film achieves such effects. It addresses the relationship of sound to image, the history of film sound technologies, and the process of recording and reproducing sound.

Set in Hollywood at the end of the 1920s, *Singin' in the Rain* follows efforts at the fictional Monumental Pictures to make the studio's first successful sound film. Although the film's self-consciousness about the filmmaking process invites the audience into a behind-the-scenes perspective, the film itself continues to employ every available technique to achieve the illusionism of the Hollywood musical. One of the lessons of the film is that a "talking picture" is not just "a silent picture with some talking added," as the studio producer assumes it to be. The film shows that adding sound to images enhances them with all the exuberance of song and dance, comedy, and romance. It also suggests that a great deal of labor and equipment are involved in creating such effects.

From the very beginning of *Singin' in the Rain*, the technology responsible for sound reproduction — technology that usually is hidden — is displayed. The film opens outside a Hollywood movie palace where crowds have gathered for the premiere of the new Don Lockwood and Lina Lamont picture. Our first orientation is aural: "Ladies and gentlemen, I am speaking to you from …." The asynchronous announcer's voice carries across the crowds and seems to address us directly. The second shot opens directly on a loudspeaker, underscoring the parallelism of image and soundtrack, and then begins to explore the crowd of listeners. When we first see the radio announcer, the source of the synchronous voice, the microphone is very prominent in the mise-en-scène **[Figure 6.15]**. Referring to the bygone days of radio and silent movies, the film celebrates its modern audience's opportunity to watch sound and image combined in a sophisticated MGM musical.

6.15 ***Singin' in the Rain*** (1952). A concern with sound-recording technology is evident in the microphone's prominence in the first scene.

Singin' in the Rain immediately begins to exploit the resources and conventions of studio-era sound cinema. When star Don Lockwood (Gene Kelly) is interviewed, he embellishes the story of his past to the assembled crowds and the radio listeners at home. But a flashback contradicts his diegetic voiceover. As his offscreen voice speaks of studying at a music conservatory, we see him and his buddy, Cosmo Brown (Donald O'Connor), performing a vaudeville routine instead. Contrapuntal sound shows that images and voices can be out of sync, a theme that becomes prominent in the film as a whole. It also shows the multiple ways the soundtrack can interact with the images. The comic vaudeville routine is, in turn, accompanied by lively music and humorous sound effects — the diegetic sound of the flashback world — encouraging our direct appreciation of the number. Next we hear the crowd's appreciative reactions to Lockwood's narration, a narration that we know to be phony. However, we do not experience these two different levels of sound — Don's self-serving narration and the debunking synchronized sound of the flashbacks — as confusing. It is clear that the film's unveiling of the mechanisms of sound technology will not limit its own reliance on the multiple illusions of sound-image relationships.

Later, when Don wants to express the depth of his feelings to Kathy Selden (Debbie Reynolds), he takes her to an empty soundstage. Ironically, his sincerity depends on the artifice of a sunset background, a wind machine, and a battery of mood lights, which together render the very picture of romance **[Figure 6.16]**. Yet the corresponding sound illusion is conjured without any visible sound recording or effects equipment, much less an onscreen orchestra. Indeed, each of Don's touches, such as switching on the wind machine, is synchronized with a nondiegetic musical flourish. It is possible to ask us to suspend our disbelief in this way because, in the film's world, music is everywhere.

6.16 ***Singin' in the Rain*** (1952). The illusion of romance is visibly created on the soundstage, but the music that the characters dance to has no apparent source.

Don's love interest Kathy is depicted as genuine because she can sing: her image and sound go together. In contrast, his onscreen leading lady, Lina Lamont (Jean Hagen), represents an image without the animating authenticity of sound. Although Lina is beautiful, she speaks with a comical accent. Ironically, the actress's hilarious performance is one of the greatest aural pleasures of the movie. In the course of the film, Don Lockwood must learn to incorporate his true self — the one who expresses himself by "singin' and dancin' in the rain" — into his onscreen persona.

Nothing illustrates the film's paradoxical acknowledgment of the sound-image illusions constructed by Hollywood and its indulgence in them better than the contrast between the disastrous premiere of the nonsinging *The Dueling Cavalier* and the film's final scene at the opening night of the musical *The Dancing Cavalier*, in which the truth of Lina's imposture comes out. In the former, a noisy audience

laughs at and heckles the errors of poor synchronous sound recording. The actors' heartbeats and rustling costumes drown out their dialogue (for us, of course, the laughter and the heartbeats are both sound effects, the latter mixed at comically high levels). The film they have created fundamentally misunderstands the promise of "talking pictures."

At the premiere of the musical *The Dancing Cavalier*, in contrast, the film finally makes the proper match, not only between sound and image (thus correcting the humorous synchronization problems of the first version) but also between Don and Kathy. After she is forced to dub Lina "live" at the premiere and the hoax is exposed when the curtains are drawn for all the audience to see, the humiliated Kathy runs from the stage. Don gets her back by singing "You Are My Lucky Star" to her from the stage (thus demonstrating before the audience in the film that unlike Lina, he used his own singing voice during the film within a film). Cosmo conducts the conveniently present orchestra (the premiere is of a sound film that should not require accompaniment), and Kathy joins Don in a duet.

But we should not read the film as suggesting that the onscreen orchestra is more genuine than the romantic background music of the earlier scenes because it is synchronous. The film ends triumphantly with asynchronous music. A full, invisible chorus picks up "You Are My Lucky Star" as the camera takes us out into the open air, to pause on the billboard announcing the premiere of *Singin' in the Rain*, starring Lockwood and Selden (who are represented by images of the stars of the movie by the same name that we are watching, Gene Kelly and Debbie Reynolds) **[Figure 6.17]**. This patently fake chorus and the billboard advertising the film we are watching are the culmination of the film's effort to render Hollywood illusionism — so aptly represented by extravagant musicals such as *Singin' in the Rain* — natural. *Singin' in the Rain* dramatizes the arrival of sound in Hollywood as the inevitable and enjoyable combination of sound and image.

6.17 ***Singin' in the Rain*** (1952). The film's final reflexive moment is accompanied by an invisible chorus on the soundtrack.

Sound Production

As early as preproduction, a **sound designer** plans a film's overall sound. During production, **sound recording** of dialogue and other sound takes place simultaneously with the filming of a scene. At the beginning of each take, the hinged clapstick on the **clapperboard** is snapped to synchronize sound recordings and camera images [Figure 6.18]. Microphones for recording sound may be placed on

the actors, suspended over the action outside the frame (on a long pole called a **boom**), or placed in other locations on set.

kckate16/iStock/Getty Images

6.18 Clapperboard. Invented by Australian filmmaker F. W. Thring, clapperboards have been used to synchronize sound and image since the first sound films.

Direct sound is sound captured directly from its source, and **reflected sound** is captured as it bounces from the walls and sets to give a sense of space. The **production sound mixer** (or sound recordist) combines these different sources during filming, adjusting their relative volume or balance. In the multitrack sound-recording process introduced in Robert Altman's *Nashville* (1975), as many as twenty-four separate tracks of sound can be recorded on twelve tracks. Besides adding an audio density to the realism of the

image, both direct and reflected sound can be used to comment creatively on the characters and their environment — for instance, in Altman's films, emphasizing the complexity of communication.

When a cut of the film is prepared, **postproduction sound** is recorded to fill out the soundtrack. Sound effects may be gathered, produced by sound-effects editors on computers, retrieved from a sound library, or generated by **foley artists**. Named for the legendary sound man Jack Foley, these are members of the sound crew who generate live synchronized sound effects — footsteps, the rustle of leaves, a key turning in a lock — while watching the projected film on what is called a *foley stage* **[Figure 6.19]**. **Room tone** may be recorded to approximate the aural properties of a location or extras instructed to speak the nonsense word **walla** to approximate the sound of a crowd to fill out the soundtrack.

6.19 Foley artists. While watching the film, foley artists use a range of props to create sound effects like clothing rustling or doors opening and closing.

During **automated dialogue replacement (ADR)**, actors watch the film footage and rerecord their lines to be dubbed into the soundtrack (this is also known as *looping*, as a section of image track must be replayed while the new sound is recorded). **Sound editing** is combining music, dialogue, and effects tracks to interact with the image track. This creates rhythmic relationships, establishes connections between sound and onscreen sources, and smooths or marks transitions. When a sound is carried over a picture transition or belongs to the coming scene but is played before the image changes, it is termed a **sound bridge**. For example, music might continue over a scene change or montage sequence, or dialogue

might begin before the speaking characters are seen by the audience. The director often consults with the composer and with the picture and sound editors to determine where music and effects will be added, a process called **spotting**. The film's composer then begins composing the score, which is recorded to synchronize with the film's final cut **[Figure 6.20]**.

Courtesy Salt Film Productions, Inc.

6.20 Scoring *Far from Heaven* (2002). Director Todd Haynes and composer Elmer Bernstein as they record the film's score, which re-creates the sound of 1950s Hollywood movies.

Sound mixing (or *rerecording*) is the process by which all the elements of the soundtrack — including music, effects, and dialogue — are combined and adjusted to their final levels. It is an important stage in the postproduction of a film and can occur only after the image track, including the credits, is complete (that is, after the picture is "locked"). As multiple tracks are mixed, they are cut and extended, adjusted, and "sweetened" by the sound editor with the input of the director and sometimes the sound designer and picture editor. The final mix might place extra emphasis on dialogue, modulate a mood through the volume of the music, or punch up sound effects during an action sequence. In a film like *Barton Fink* (1991), much of the sense of inhabiting a slightly unreal world is generated by a sound mix that incorporates sounds such as animal noises into the effects accompanying creaking doors. At a film's final **mix**, a sound mixer combines separate soundtracks into a single master track that will be transferred onto the film print together with the image track to which it is synchronized. Optical tracks are "married" to the image track on the film print. Digital tracks may be printed on film or recorded for digital projection.

Sound reproduction is sound playback during a film's exhibition. It is the stage in the process when the film's audience experiences the

film's sound in a movie theater as signals converted back to sound waves by the sound system during projection.

The Social Network (2010), directed by David Fincher, is dominated by the sound of actors' voices reciting screenwriter Aaron Sorkin's distinctive dialogue. *The Terminator* (1984) keys us to events in its futuristic world by noises, and the title of *The Sound of Music* (1965) announces what one can expect to hear on its soundtrack. In a film soundtrack, these three elements often are present simultaneously. In some sense, a film's image track, composed of relatively discrete photographic images and text, is simpler and more unified. Nevertheless, although these three sound elements can all be present and combined in relation to any given image, conventions have evolved governing these relationships. Usually dialogue is audible over music, for example, and only in special cases does a piece of music dictate the images that accompany it. In the following sections, we examine each of the three basic elements of the soundtrack and its potential to make meaning in combination with images and other sounds. We uncover conventional usages of soundtracks and discuss the ways that they have both shaped the film experience and given direction to theorists' inquiries into the properties and potential of film sound.

Voice in Film

Human speech, primarily in the form of dialogue, is often central to understanding narrative film. The acoustic qualities of the voices of actors make distinct contributions to films: Jimmy Stewart's drawl is relaxed and reassuring; a Sandra Bullock character can range between high and low acoustic tones to create a personality that is sometimes in control and then out of control. In animation, sound commonly is prepared in advance of the images — which is the reverse of live-action filmmaking. For many modern animated features, like *Moana* (2016) **[Figure 6.21]**, celebrities like Dwayne Johnson are hired to voice major characters. In an example of an increasingly common practice, Johnson (as Maui) and newcomer Auli'l Cravalho (as the title character) recorded their parts separately in the studio rather than together.

6.21 ***Moana*** (2016). Dwayne Johnson (formerly known as wrestler "The Rock") voices the demigod Maui in this Disney animated hit. Although his familiar face is not visible in the film, his name featured prominently in the film's advertisements.

Making an intelligible record of an actor's speech quickly became the primary goal in early film sound-recording processes, although this goal required some important concessions in the otherwise primary quest for realism. For example, think about how we hear film characters' speech. Although the image track may cut from a long shot of a conversation, to a medium shot of two characters, and finally to a series of close-up, shot/reverse-shot pairings, the soundtrack does not reproduce these distances accurately through changes in volume or the relationship between direct and reflected sound. Rather, actors are miked so that what they say is recorded directly and is clear, intelligible, and uniform in volume throughout the dialogue scene. **Sound perspective**, which refers to the apparent location and distance of a sound source, remains close.

Dialogue

But *what* actors say is crucial: speech establishes character motivation and goals and conveys plot information. Advances in recording technology have allowed filmmakers to experiment with how dialogue is used to tell their stories. Director Robert Altman's innovations in multitrack film sound recording in *Nashville* (1975), mentioned earlier in this chapter, allowed each actor to be miked and separately recorded. One stylistic feature of this technique is Altman's extensive use of **overlapping dialogue** — mixing characters' speeches to imitate the rhythm of speech, a technique Orson Welles attempted with less sophisticated recording

technology. In *Nashville*, characters constantly talk over each other [Figure 6.22]. This technique, which may make individual lines less distinct, is often used to approximate the everyday experience of hearing multiple, competing speakers and sounds at the same time.

6.22 *Nashville* (1975). Robert Altman's twelve-track recording process captures each character individually, and overlapping dialogue is used in the final mix.

Dialogue is also given priority when it carries over visual shifts, such as shot/reverse-shot patterns of editing conversations. We watch one actor begin a line and then watch the listener as the first actor continues speaking. Sound preserves temporal continuity as the scene is broken down into individual shots.

Voice-Off and Voiceover

A **voice-off** is a voice that originates from a speaker who can be inferred to be present in the scene but is not currently visible. This

technique is a good example of the greater spatial flexibility of sound over image. Early in the film *M* (1931), the murderer's offscreen whistle is heard, followed by an onscreen shadow of a man, combining the expressive possibility of sound (recently introduced when the film was made) with that of lighting and mise-en-scène **[Figure 6.23]**. The opening shot of *Laura* (1944) follows a detective looking around an elegantly furnished apartment as a **narrator** — a character or other person whose voice and perspective describe the action of a film, usually in voiceover — introduces the film's events. Abruptly, the same voice addresses the detective from an adjacent room, telling him to be careful of what he touches. The unidentified narrator becomes a character in the film in a striking use of voice-off.

10000 Mk
Belohnung
Wer ist der Mörder
Seit Montag, dem 11. Juni ds. Js., werden vermißt:
Der Schüler Kurt Klawitzky und dessen Schwester Klara,
gewesen Müllerstr.
Aus verschiedene
ähnlichen
Jahre
STAT
FILMCE

6.23 ***M*** (1931). An offscreen whistle first suggests the murderer's presence in Fritz Lang's masterpiece of early sound cinema. Coupling the whistle with the shadow of the man, Fritz Lang used both sound and lighting to heighten the suspense.

The use of the voice-off in a classical film is a strong tool in the service of film realism, implying that the mise-en-scène extends beyond the borders of the frame, but the illusion of realism can be challenged if the origins of the voice-off are not clear. The voice-off of HAL 9000, the computer in *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968), is consistent with realism because the voice has a known source. However, the even level of volume makes it seem to pervade the spaceship even as it retains its intimate quality. The film's uncanny combination of humanity and technology shows how the voice-off can introduce distance into the customary match of sound and image.

A voice-off is distinguished from the familiar technique of **voiceover** — a voice whose source is neither visible in the frame nor implied to be offscreen and typically narrates the film's images — by the simple fact that voiceovers are nondiegetic sounds. Characters cannot hear the voiceover. The voiceover is an important structuring device in film: a text spoken by an offscreen narrator can act as the organizing principle behind virtually all of the film's images, such as in a documentary film, a commercial, or an experimental video or essay film. The unseen narrators of the classic documentaries *Night Mail* (1936) and *The Plow That Broke the Plains* (1936) offer a poem about

the British postal service and an account of the U.S. government's agricultural programs, respectively. The voiceover device soon became the cornerstone of the documentary tradition, in which the voiceover "anchors" the potential ambiguity of the film's images.

The sonic qualities of such voiceovers — usually male, resonant, and "unmarked" by class, regional, or foreign accent or other distinguishing features — are meant to connote trustworthiness (although today they can sound propagandistic). In Raul Peck's essayistic documentary *I Am Not Your Negro* (2016), Samuel L. Jackson's rendering of the words of James Baldwin introduces a subjective, though still authoritative quality to the voiceover. The traditional technique of directing our interpretation of images through a transcendent voiceover is sometimes referred to as the "voice of God." Confident male voices of this type are still heard in nature shows, commercials, and movie trailers. The title of the independent comedy *In a World* (2013) is the catchphrase of famous voiceover artist Don LaFontaine. The film pays homage to these invisible talents while challenging gender hierarchies, as the film's protagonist (played by director Lake Bell) gets the opportunity to be the first woman to use the phrase for a movie trailer, hinting at a new world in Hollywood **[Figure 6.24]**.

6.24 ***In a World*** (2013). The tradition of the booming male voiceover in movie trailers is challenged in this comedy about communication, authority, and changing gender roles in Hollywood.

Voiceovers can also render characters' subjective states. Much of the humor of the *Bridget Jones* series (2001–2016), for instance, comes from viewers' access to the heroine's internal (semidiegetic) comments on the situations she encounters **[Figure 6.25]**. But voiceover can also be an important structural device in narration, orienting viewers to the temporal organization of a story by setting up a flashback or providing a transition back to the film's present. For example, a voiceover narration in the present can accompany a scene from the past that uses both images and sounds from within the depicted world. Use of voiceovers to organize a film's temporality is prevalent in certain genres such as film noir, in which the voiceover imitates the hard-boiled, first-person investigative style of the literary works from which many of these stories are adapted. Sometimes, in keeping with the murky world of film noir or the

limited perspective of the investigator, such voiceovers prove unreliable, as we find out in *Laura* (1944) **[Figure 6.26]**.

6.25 ***Bridget Jones's Baby*** (2016). The subjective voiceover of this film humorously articulates the desires and anxieties of the heroine as she goes through pregnancy and childbirth.

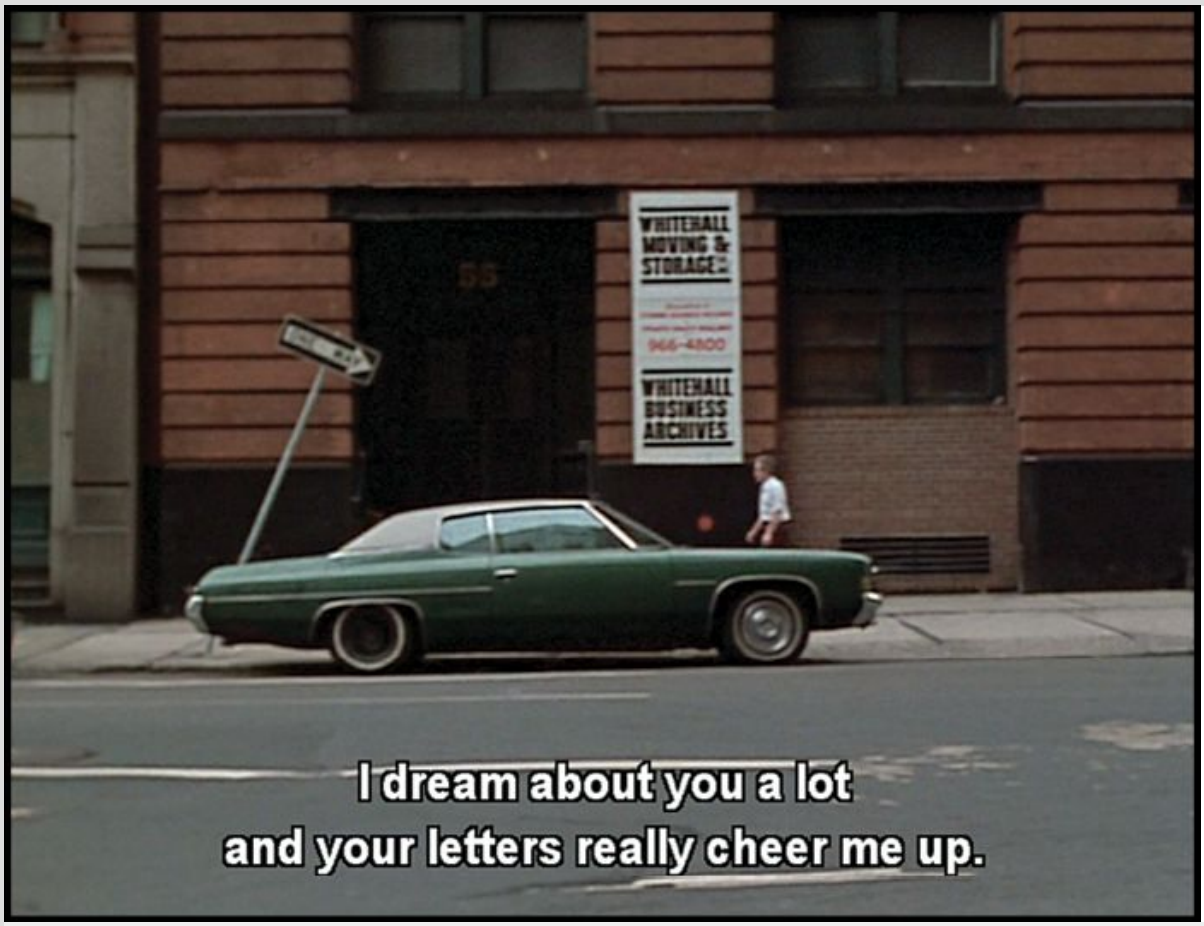
6.26 ***Laura*** (1944). Shown writing in a bathtub, Waldo Lydecker (Clifton Webb) opens the film with a voiceover narration. His account of the heroine's death proves him to be unreliable when she is discovered to be alive.

The use of voiceover in Michael Curtiz's *Mildred Pierce* (1945) shows the clash of styles in the film between the film noir genre, which customarily has a male protagonist/narrator, and the **women's pictures** of the same period that featured female stars in romances or melodramas. In these films, the lead character faces exaggerated versions of the problems many women encounter. In the beginning of the film, Mildred (played by Joan Crawford) confesses to a crime she did not commit and begins her life story in a voiceover: "It

seems as if I was born in a kitchen," she narrates. However, the device is soon abandoned, and her voiceover's credibility is compromised as Mildred's version of events is discredited by the police; her voiceover ultimately confirms their point of view. Later examples of female voiceovers, such as that of Sarah Connor in *The Terminator* (1984) and *Terminator 2: Judgment Day* (1991), gave more credibility to the female narrator. The adult female narration that frames *Eve's Bayou* (1997) contrasts with the imperfect understanding of the child's point of view in the flashback. Together they represent an untold story of African American female experience **[Figure 6.27]**.

6.27 ***Eve's Bayou*** (1997). A little girl's version of events gains credence through the voiceover device.

In an experimental film, voiceovers may lead the viewer/listener to think about different levels of the film's fiction. The soundtrack of Chantal Akerman's *News from Home* (1976) consists of the director's voice reading the letters that her mother back home in Belgium wrote to her in New York **[Figure 6.28]**. The images depict sparsely populated New York streets and lonely subway platforms and cars. The disjunction between voice and image reinforces the distance mentioned in the correspondence.



6.28 ***News from Home*** (1976). Letters from home are read over images of a lonely New York City, creating a poetic disjunction across the spaces of the film.

Description
The pole of a street sign that reads,"One Way" is bent to point slightly downward, toward the car and a lone man walking in the direction of the sign.

Ever since “the talkies” were introduced, the human voice has organized systems of meaning in various types of film. Narrative films are frequently driven by dialogue, documentaries by voiceover, and experimental films often turn voice into an aesthetic element. Some writers suggest that a theory of “voice” can open up cinema analysis to more meanings than a model devoted to the image alone. Although we have stressed how frequently film sound is subordinated to the image, the realm of the voice shows us how central sound is to cinema’s intelligibility.

Music in Film

Music is a crucial element in the film experience. Among a range of other effects, it provides rhythm and deepens emotional response. Music has rarely been absent from film programs, and many of the venues for early film originally hosted musical entertainments. The piano, an important element of public and private amusements at the turn of the twentieth century, quickly became a cornerstone of film exhibition. Throughout the silent film period, scoring for films steadily developed from the collections of music cues that accompanists and ensembles played to correspond with appropriate

moments in films to full-length compositions for specific films. When D. W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation* premiered in 1915, a full orchestra, playing Joseph Carl Breil's score in which the Ku Klux Klan rallied to Richard Wagner's "Ride of the Valkyries," was a major audience attraction. Even the architecture of the large movie palaces constructed during this period was acoustically geared to audiences who listened to orchestral music in a concert setting. The introduction of dialogue presented problems of scale and volume in the movie palaces.

Although the term *talkies* for the new sound films soon took over, musicals were a significant part of this transition, and the golden age of Hollywood is often associated with the MGM musicals of the 1940s and 1950s. At the end of the studio era, the great tradition of the Hollywood musical also began to wane, but the periodic revival of the genre shows how central music is to the narrative film experience, even at the cost of verisimilitude.

Yet movies of every genre — including western, historical, disaster, crime, comedy, and science fiction films — relied on music from the beginning. Music contributes to categorizing such films *as* genre films. Vangelis's music for *Blade Runner* (1982), for example, distinctly marks it as a science fiction film. In contrast, Max Steiner's score for *Gone with the Wind* (1939) sets its nostalgic, romantic tone.

Narrative Music

Music is the only element of cinematic discourse besides credits that is primarily nondiegetic. Film music encourages us to let our barriers down and experience the movie as immediate and enveloping, easing our transition into the fictional world. Although overblown background music can jolt us out of a film, often we value the musical **score** (music composed to accompany the completed film) as a crucial element of our affective, or emotional, response to a film. The celebrated gag in Mel Brooks's *Blazing Saddles* (1974), in which the musical soundtrack turns out to be coming from Count Basie's jazz orchestra playing in the middle of the desert, shows how readily we accept the convention of nondiegetic music **[Figure 6.29]**.

6.29 ***Blazing Saddles*** (1974). Soundtrack music finds its onscreen source in Count Basie's orchestra playing in a desert in Mel Brooks's western spoof.

Classical film music developed practices of composition and mixing that supported the aim of storytelling. The term **underscoring**, also referred to as *background music* (in contrast to diegetic source music), emphasizes this status. Much of classical Hollywood film music is derived from nineteenth-century, late-Romantic orchestral music. The work of such composers as Richard Wagner, Johann Strauss, and Richard Strauss relied on compositional principles such as motifs assigned to different characters, settings, or actions. This type of music conveyed to audiences particular associations and

values that ranged from the high cultural status conferred on symphonic music of European origin (as opposed to the lower status of American jazz or pop) to the recognizable connotations of instrumentation, such as somber horns for a funereal mood, violins for romance, and a harp for an ethereal or heavenly mood.

A piece of music composed for a particular place in a film is referred to as a **cue** — a visual or aural signal that indicates the beginning of an action, line of dialogue, or piece of music. Often music reinforces story information through recognizable conventions. For example, the "Raiders March" in the *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (1981) and its sequels echoes classical adventure serials of the 1930s and 1940s. Discontinuities in visual information represented by cuts and scene changes are frequently bridged by music. Various arrangements of the theme song of *High Noon* (1952) carry characters across space and help bridge transitions between scene changes.

Narrative cueing is the way that sound tells viewers what is happening in the plot. A few notes of "Deutschland über Alles" in the score of *Casablanca* (1942), for example, signify the looming Nazi threat. The most noticeable examples are **stingers**, which are sounds that force the audience to notice the significance of something onscreen — like the discordant blast in *The Shining* (1980) that marks the moment when Wendy, the mother, looks at her bedroom door through her mirror and sees the word *murder* scrawled on it **[Figure 6.30]**. Overillustrating the action through the

score, such as by using plucked strings to accompany a character walking on tip-toe, is called **mickey-mousing**, in reference to the way cartoons often use the musical score to follow or mimic every action. Composer Mark Mothersbaugh incorporates a contemporary version of this practice in collaborations with Wes Anderson like *The Royal Tenenbaums* (2001).

6.30 ***The Shining*** (1980). When Wendy awakens and sees through the mirror what Danny has written on the door, a shocked look appears on her face. The stinger makes sure the audience doesn't miss the word *murder*.

Through the use of themes assigned to particular figures, music also participates in characterization. Often, we know when the main character has entered the scene not only visually but also aurally. The presence of "bad girl" Marylee Hadley in *Written on the Wind* (1956) is signaled by a distinctive sultry theme. Meanwhile, composed by Jonny Greenwood of Radiohead, the music identified with Daniel Plainview in *There Will Be Blood* (2007) has a dissonant string arrangement that eerily complements this troubled and troubling character. For the three chapters that comprise the story of the main character's growing up in Barry Jenkins's *Moonlight* (2016), composer Nicholas Britell "chopped and screwed" a single theme, slowing it down to bend the pitch and our associations **[Figure 6.31]**.

6.31 ***Moonlight*** (2016). The violin and piano theme composed for the character known as "Little" in the film's first section is reorchestrated for the adult Chiron in the third section.

Music is a powerful way to express emotion in cinema. In Hitchcock's *Spellbound* (1945), for example, the mental state of the hero is conveyed by the sound of the theremin, an unusual electronic instrument that is played without physical contact and whose spooky sound is also used in science fiction films **[Figure 6.32]**. The ambient score for David Fincher's *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* (2011) by Trent Reznor of the band Nine Inch Nails and Atticus Ross helps create a bleak and tense emotional landscape. Frequently, lush orchestration can ennoble specific events and make them feel timeless. In *War Horse* (2011), the lavish musical score adds an epic dimension to the boy's relationship to his horse **[Figure 6.33]**. In a film like the Jane Austen adaptation *Emma* (1997), Rachel Portman's score is more restrained, introducing humor as it comments on character's emotions. Portman became the first female composer to win an Oscar for her score. To date, only six women have been nominated at the Oscars for film scoring.

6.32 ***Spellbound*** (1945). Gregory Peck's character is stricken by an episode of vertigo, signaled by the theremin on the soundtrack.

6.33 *War Horse* (2011). Composer John Williams's score helps intensify the emotion in this tale of a boy and his horse during World War I.

Although musical scoring conventions have evolved and changed since the classical era of studio filmmaking, in the orchestral scores of John Williams — the best-known composer of the past three decades — we can hear an homage to the romantic styles of the studio composers of earlier decades. Williams composes heroic, nostalgic scores that support and sometimes inflate the narrative's significance. He is known for scoring the *Star Wars* movies (from the 1977 original to *Episode IX: The Rise of Skywalker* in 2019), the *Harry Potter* films (2001–2011), and the *Indiana Jones* films (1981–2008, plus an upcoming fifth film). His five Academy Awards and fifty-one nominations suggest that his style embodies ideals of Hollywood scoring.

In Hollywood cinema of the studio era, nonclassical musical styles such as jazz, popular, and dance music were used as source music and featured in musicals, but their incorporation into background music was gradual. One of the effects of the neglect of American musical idioms in favor of European influences was that African American artists and performers were rendered almost as inaudible as they were invisible in mainstream movies. African American performers frequently were featured in musicals, but they were there to provide entertainment and were rarely integrated into the narrative. Lena Horne's talent, for example, was underutilized

because there were almost no leading roles for African American women in the 1940s and 1950s [Figure 6.34].

6.34 ***Words and Music*** (1948). Jazz singer Lena Horne's appearances in MGM musicals were generally limited to cameo numbers that could be cut out by exhibitors in segregated theaters.

As jazz music became more popular, jazz themes began to appear in urban-based film noirs of the 1940s. Henry Mancini's music for Orson Welles's *Touch of Evil* (1958) effectively connotes themes of crime, violence, and sexuality in the exaggerated border-town setting. With other changes in the U.S. film industry in the postwar

period, musical conventions shifted as well. Modernist and jazz-influenced scores, such as Leonard Bernstein's score for *On the Waterfront* (1954), became more common as different audiences were targeted through more individualized filmmaking practices. More recently, in *Whiplash* (2014), the main character is a jazz drumming student who is pushed to master the title composition by Hank Levy.

Pop Music in Film

VIEWING CUE

As you watch the film assigned for your next class, pay particular attention to its music. Is the film's score drawn from the classical tradition? Is popular music used? How do scoring choices contribute to the film's meaning?

Popular songs have long had a place in the movies, promoting audience participation and identification by appealing to tastes shared by generations or ethnic groups. Sheet music and recordings sales were profitable tie-ins even before the era of sound cinema. By the 1980s, the practice of tying the emotional (and commercial) response of the audience to popular music in film was so well established that pop scores consisting of **prerecorded music**, often popular songs, began to rival originally composed music on a film's soundtrack. *American Graffiti* (1973) helped inaugurate this trend with its soundtrack of nostalgic 1960s tunes, and *The Big Chill* (1983)

captured the zeitgeist of a generation through popular songs. In the 1980s, the proliferation of the pop soundtrack drew the film experience outside the theater to the record store, and music videos began to include scenes from upcoming films.

The centrality of prerecorded music is reflected in the rise of the **music supervisor**, the individual who selects and secures the rights for songs to be used in films. Sofia Coppola's movies are recognizable by the distinctive music selected by music supervisor Brian Reitzell. *The Bling Ring* (2013) features M.I.A., Sleigh Bells, Lil Wayne, and other contemporary musicians. In dance films such as *Step Up 3D* (2010), the soundtrack becomes a way for viewers to participate in the scene. Superhero films also draw effectively on the connotations of pop songs. The *Guardians of the Galaxy* series (2014–present) incorporates hit songs from the late 1960s and 1970s as a defining characteristic of protagonist Peter Quill, who remembers his deceased mother through the cassette tapes that she left for him. Meanwhile, *Suicide Squad* (2016) uses a jukebox's worth of classic-rock hits, reportedly worked into the film itself after they played well in the movie's trailers **[Figure 6.35]**. Although theme songs have been composed for and promoted with films for decades (notably in the James Bond films), the contemporary movie and music industries have such close business relationships that many films and franchises are expected to feature a tie-in song. The theme from *The Fast and Furious: Tokyo Drift* (2006) was by the Japanese hip hop band Teriyaki Boyz. "See You Again," the credits song from *Furious 7*

(2015), was a tribute to one of the film's stars, Paul Walker, who died before the movie's release, and it became a hit in part because of fans' emotional response to that loss.

6.35 ***Suicide Squad*** (2016). Harley Quinn (Margot Robbie) is introduced with Lesley Gore's 1963 song "You Don't Own Me," a moment initially designed for a trailer that made it into the finished film.

Sound Effects in Film

Much of the impression of film's realism comes from the use of sound effects, although, like other aspects of the soundtrack, viewers may not consciously notice these effects. Dialogue in film is deliberate; it tells a story and gives information. Nondiegetic background music is unrealistic if we pay attention to it. But sound effects often appear natural. In daily life, we hardly notice ubiquitous sounds like fluorescent lights humming, crickets

chirping, and traffic going by — sounds that might be added to a film to achieve a realistic sound mix.

In most films, every noise that we hear is selected, and these effects generally conform to our expectations of movie sounds. Virtually nothing appears onscreen that does not make its corresponding noise: dogs bark, babies cry. However, the sounds that we expect to hear in film are not always, in fact, realistic: for instance, a spaceship that blows up in outer space in a movie will usually produce a colossal bang, even though in reality there is no sound in space. If a .38 revolver sounds like a cap gun when recorded, it will be dubbed with a louder bang. These expectations vary according to film genre. Traffic noise will be loud in an action film, in which we remain alive to the possibilities of the environment. In a romance, the sound of cars will likely fade away unless traffic is keeping the lovers apart.

Asynchronous sound effects, such as the hoot of an owl in a dark woods setting, both expand the sense of space and contribute to mood, often in very codified, even clichéd ways. Adding the clank of utensils and snatches of offscreen conversation to the soundtrack when two characters are shown at a table conjures a restaurant setting without having to shoot the scene in an actual restaurant. In contrast, the synchronous sound effect of stirring tea with a spoon in *Get Out* (2017) attunes the spectator to the repetitive sound that

hypnotizes the protagonist and reveals the horrific truth beneath the placid surface of a wealthy white suburb [Figure 6.36].

6.36 ***Get Out*** (2017). Sound editor Trevor Gates and composer Michael Abels collaborated on a chilling soundtrack that belies the setting's patina of normalcy.

The expectation that every element of the mise-en-scène will make a naturalistic noise can also be frustrated with creative use of effects. German filmmaker Ulrike Ottinger's *Madame X: An Absolute Ruler* (1977) makes ingenious use of postsynchronous sound. Her film's motley crew of female pirates do not speak. Instead, their movements are synchronized with noises like animal growls or metallic clanking [Figure 6.37].

Courtesy of Women Make Movies www.wmm.com

6.37 ***Madame X: An Absolute Ruler*** (1977). In Ulrike Ottinger's film, in lieu of dialogue, the character's movements are synchronized with a sound montage of noises like animal growls or metallic clanking.

Sound effects are one of the most useful ways of giving an impression of depth to two-dimensional images when they are reproduced in the three-dimensional space of the theater. A gunshot may come from the left-hand side of the screen, for example. At the same time that they serve a mimetic function, sound effects have become part of how the cinema experience is distinguished from the ordinary. THX is a standards system — devised by director George Lucas and named after his first feature film, *THX 1138* (1971) — for evaluating and ensuring the quality of sound presentation. THX theaters promise to deliver an intense aural experience that is identical in each certified venue.

The importance of a film's sound to the Hollywood illusion is marked in the relatively recent Academy Award category for sound-effects editing. The extraordinary density of contemporary soundtracks does not necessarily mean that they are more realistic than the less dense soundtracks of classical Hollywood. Instead, they use the particular properties of sound and new technologies to convey an increasingly visceral experience of the cinema. Art cinema auteurs like Argentine filmmaker Lucrecia Martel also employ complex sound design to heighten and defamiliarize the viewer's experience of a situation. In the opening moments of her

debut film *La Ciénaga* (2001), sounds of clinking ice and outdoor furniture being dragged around a pool add to a feeling of oppressive heat and lethargy [Figure 6.38].

6.38 ***La Ciénaga*** (2001). Lucrecia Martel's unique style as a filmmaker was established with the sound design of this film set in the stifling heat of provincial Argentina.

VIEWING CUE

LaunchPad

Watch this scene from Terrence Malick's *The Thin Red Line* (1998), and determine which sound seems especially responsible for conveying information to the spectator. How do voice, music, and sound effects work together?

The contemporary industry's attention to sound technologies and aesthetics creates audience expectations related to film genre. The distinctive soundtrack of *Jaws* (1975), for example, gave us both the now clichéd musical motif of the shark and a rich new standard for sound-effects use. The film acknowledges a predecessor in the genre when the death of the shark is accompanied by a sound effect of a prehistoric beast's death from *King Kong* (1933). In these monster movies, sound effects can refer to familiar experiences and take us far beyond everyday events.

Cartoons are excellent demonstrations of the ways that sound effects are synchronized to onscreen actions. Drawings do not "naturally" make sounds of their own, so every sound in an animated film is conventionalized. In *Frozen* (2013), for example, a

simple sound like the cracking of ice must be precisely engineered and calibrated for its effectiveness [Figure 6.39].

6.39 ***Frozen*** (2013). The dramatic sounds of cracking ice match the grandeur of the animation.

Thinking about Film Sound

Sounds are grounded in viewers' everyday activities and contribute to movies' immediacy and sensory richness. Film sound — whether the pathos of Louis Gottschalk's score for D. W. Griffith's *Broken Blossoms* (1919), the stimulating interactions between the musical quotations in *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968) and Alex North's original music for the film, the indelible aural record of Laurence Olivier's performance of *Hamlet* (1948), or the comical sounds of Jacques Tati's *Playtime* (1967) — intensifies our viewing experience. Paradoxically, movie soundscapes often eschew realism and plausibility in order to heighten authenticity and emotion, like foregrounding actors' whispered conversation in a crowded room so we feel intimately connected to them.

Sound Continuity and Sound Montage

VIEWING CUE

To what extent do sound effects add to a film's sense of realism? Watch this clip from Debra Granik's *Winter's Bone* (2010), and explain how sounds create a particular impression of location, action, or mood.

The ways in which filmmakers choose to relate sound to image also distinctively affect our viewing experience. Some filmmakers use sound to support the narrative aim and smooth over gaps in a story. **Sound continuity** describes the process of furthering the aims of the narrative through scoring, sound recording, mixing, and playback processes that strive for the unification of meaning and experience. In contrast, other filmmakers use sound to act as a counterpoint to the image. **Sound montage** is the collision or overlapping of disjunctive sounds in a film. Most assumptions, shared by technicians and viewers, about what constitutes a "good" soundtrack emphasize a continuity approach. However, since the introduction of sound, many filmmakers have used it as a separate element for a montage effect, a practice enhanced by the increasing sophistication of audio technology.

Sound Continuity

Matching up actors' voices with their moving lips and ensuring the words were intelligible were among the early goals of sound technology. Audiences were thrilled just to *see* the match. The degree of redundancy between image and sound in the continuity tradition still makes it difficult to analyze the soundtrack autonomously. From the priority granted to synchronization, we can define several compatible continuity practices:

- The relationship between image and sound and among separate sounds is motivated by dramatic action or information.
- With the exception of background music, the sources of sounds are identifiable.
- The connotations of musical accompaniment are consistent with the images (for example, a funeral march is unlikely to accompany a high-speed chase).
- The sound mix emphasizes what we should pay attention to.
- The sound mix is smooth and emphasizes clarity.

Attention is directed back to the characters, actions, and mise-en-scène by sound that supports it. In *The Big Sleep* (1946), a conversation in a car between the two protagonists, Marlowe and Vivian, begins with engine noise in the background. We see that there is a dog on the porch in the opening scene of *The Searchers* (1956); when we hear it bark, the image comes alive. The relationship between image and sound and among separate sounds

will also be motivated by dramatic action or information. In *The Big Sleep*, the engine noise will soon disappear so we can focus on the characters' avowal of love. The continuous use of music to cover a sequence of character activity draws our attention away from discontinuity in the image track. For example, continuous orchestral music links the training montage sequence in *Rocky Balboa* (2006) **[Figure 6.40]**. Technology and techniques have developed in consort with these aims. Dolby noise-reduction technology improves frequency response and gives an almost unnatural clarity that serves the goal of continuity.

6.40 *Rocky Balboa* (2006). The *Rocky* film series' iconic theme song (Bill Conti's 1977 "Gonna Fly Now") ties together disparate images of Rocky doing pull-ups, jogging, and lifting weights.

Sound Montage

In Chapter 5, we define *montage* in terms of images, but the term can also denote the infinite possibilities of interactions among images and sound. Often operating in opposition to the principles of sound continuity, *sound montage* calls attention to the fact that images and sounds communicate on two different levels.

Sergei Eisenstein, the primary theorist of montage, extended his ideas to sound even before synchronous sound technology was perfected. In his first sound film, *Alexander Nevsky* (1938), he experimented with what he called "vertical montage," which emphasized both the simultaneity of and the differences between image and sound **[Figure 6.41]**. In the early sound era, filmmakers such as Jean Vigo and René Clair in France and Rouben Mamoulian and King Vidor in the United States combined sound and image in lyrical and creative ways. In Mamoulian's *Applause* (1929), for instance, music and effects do not duplicate the image but create a more subjective and atmospheric setting.

6.41 ***Alexander Nevsky*** (1938). The editing of Sergei Eisenstein's first sound film was planned to fit the film's score by Sergei Prokofiev.

Over a career spanning more than fifty years, Jean-Luc Godard is probably the most exemplary practitioner of sound montage. Godard emphasizes music in the organization of many of his films; a favorite technique is to interrupt a music cue so that it literally cannot fade into the background. In *First Name: Carmen* (1983), we see a string quartet playing without knowing what its relationship to the story might be. The abrupt cessation of a soundtrack element may be extended to voices and effects as well. In the café scene in Godard's *Band of Outsiders* (1964), one of the characters suggests that

if the friends in the group have nothing to say to each other, they should remain silent. This diegetic silence is conveyed by the complete cessation of sound on the soundtrack. By using nonauthoritative or discontinuous voiceovers as well as frequent voice-offs and by having on-camera characters address the camera, read, or make cryptic announcements, Godard challenges the natural role of the human voice in giving character and narrative information. Instead, language becomes malleable, an element in a collage of meaning.

But even in Hollywood films, sound montage can dominate, especially as soundtracks become more dense. Narratively motivated by the futuristic setting, the soundscape of Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* (1982) resembles that of an experimental film. Sound is at least as responsible as the mise-en-scène and the story line for the film's theme of anxiety in a world characterized by unchecked globalization and technological development. In Terrence Malick's *The Tree of Life* (2011), a sound montage of whispering voices, voice-off commentary, and amplified noises from nature creates a vibrating and shifting world that his characters struggle to understand. Sound designer Ben Burtt used thousands of files for the soundscape for the animated film *Wall-E* (2008) and also "voiced" the title character **[Figure 6.42]**. The aim may not be, as it was in Godard's films, to encourage reflection in the viewer on the discrete aesthetic and ideological functions of sound and image, but there is

no doubt that sound montage contributes key dimensions of the viewer's sense of wonder.

6.42 *Wall-E* (2008). The "voices" of the animated robots in Pixar's *Wall-E* were created by sound designers — both as computer sound files and as technology-based voiceover artists.

Authenticity and Attention

Authenticity is served by a subordination of sound to the cues given by the image in a practice of sound-image continuity. The montage approach, in contrast, explores the concrete nature of sounds and their potential independence of images and of each other, directing the viewer's attention to the sound mix.

Film sound, because it surrounds and permeates the body of the viewer in a way that images alone cannot, contributes to the authenticity and emotion we experience while viewing a film. Sound in film can indicate a real, multidimensional world and give the

viewer/listener the impression of being present in a particular space. Additionally, sounds such as a particular piece of music or a jarring sound effect encourage the viewer to experience emotion.

The impression of being present in space is supported by the preferences established in the standard techniques of sound recording, mixing, and reproduction. Hearing the taps on Eleanor Powell's shoes in *Born to Dance* (1936) makes us witnesses to her virtuosity **[Figure 6.43]**. Foregrounding actors' voices — through close miking, sound perspective, and mixing that emphasizes dialogue — also authenticates our perception. We are "in on" the characters' most intimate conversations. The sense of presence at the dance contest in *Saturday Night Fever* (1977) is achieved through a sound mix that sacrifices background noise to focus on the Bee Gees' music.

6.43 ***Born to Dance*** (1936). Eleanor Powell's tap dancing is a perfect display of synchronized sound.

Sound encourages the viewer to see the world in terms of particular emotions. When the lovers in *Now, Voyager* (1942) cannot really say what they mean to each other, the string section, performing Max Steiner's score, eloquently takes over. The zither theme of *The Third Man* (1949) makes us feel disoriented in the streets of postwar Vienna, just as the film's characters are. Excruciating suspense is generated in *Jurassic Park* (1993) when we hear the sound of the menacing *Tyrannosaurus rex* **[Figure 6.44]**. The acoustic

environment in film attempts to orient us in a way that feels genuine and genuinely gets us to *feel*.

6.44 *Jurassic Park* (1993). On the digital soundtrack, the *Tyrannosaurus rex*'s footsteps can be heard approaching the truck where the children are hiding, generating suspense.

Despite its success in generating authenticity and emotion, film sound is not a continuous gush from the real world. Rather it is composed of separate elements whose relationship to one another can be creatively manipulated, and numerous filmmakers use sound to draw the viewer's attention to this level. In spare films such as *Pickpocket* (1959) and *L'Argent* (1983), which explore themes of predestination and isolation through scrutiny of details, French director Robert Bresson achieves an uncanny presence of select sounds while refusing realistic indicators of space. In the book *Notes on Cinematography* (1975), Bresson sums up his ideas: "What is for

the eye must not duplicate what is for the ear." Without the use of room tone or other techniques to give spatial cues or to make sounds warmer, the minimalist sounds in his films become concrete, a practice that has greatly influenced contemporary world cinema.

The voice can draw our attention through direct address to the viewer or recitation or reading instead of naturalistic dialogue, as in the poetry in the soundtrack of Isaac Julien's *Looking for Langston* (1989), a film about historical erasures. The sensual quality of sounds can be explored as it might be in a musical composition, and poetic effects can be achieved by combining different sound "images." Voices are layered in this way in Marguerite Duras's *India Song* (1975). A film can deliver ideas through multiple channels; the sound can contradict the image. Interview texts printed on the screen are read aloud with slight alterations by the voiceovers in Trinh T. Minh-ha's *Surname Viet Given Name Nam* (1989) **[Figure 6.45]**.

6.45 ***Surname Viet Given Name Nam*** (1989). The qualities of the film's voices — they often are accented and seem to belong to nonactors reciting — convey information that cannot be gathered from images.

Description

One shot shows the woman looking at something in her hand, another shows a close up of her gazing contemplatively beyond the frame, and the third shows her looking down at a mirror that reflects her face.

FILM IN FOCUS The Sound of Silence in *A Quiet Place* (2018)

See also: *The Quiet* (2005); *The Quiet Ones* (2014); *Wonderstruck* (2017)

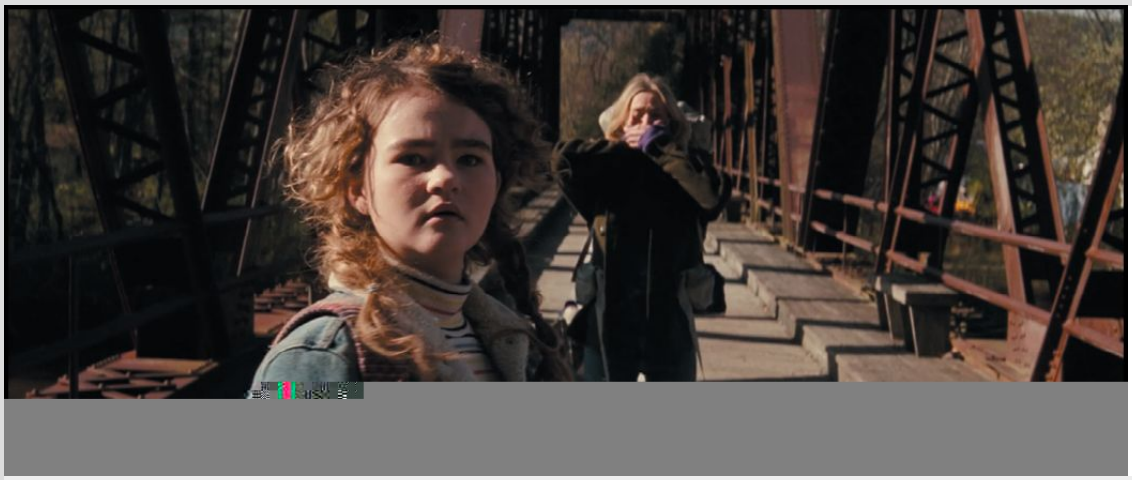
FILM IN FOCUS

To watch a clip from *A Quiet Place* (2018), go to LaunchPad for the *Film Experience* at **launchpadworks.com**

Screams, long a staple of the soundtracks of horror films — and of their audiences' reactions — come few and far between in *A Quiet Place*. This tense high-concept genre film is set in a postapocalyptic world stalked by monsters with supersensitive hearing: a quiet place full of menace. Director John Krasinski plays the father of a nuclear family that hides out on their farm, scavenging for supplies, walking barefoot and on tip-toe. The eldest child is deaf, and the family's knowledge of American Sign Language (ASL) has helped them survive. In this film, screams are the cause rather than the consequence of attacks and sudden frights. One source of foreboding is the pregnancy of the mother, played by Emily Blunt; the family members all know that inevitably, the cries of childbirth and a newborn will put them in danger.

The film's soundtrack announces itself before the film begins with a menacing tone over the company logo, mixed with a high-pitched metallic sound and a pulsing rhythm as the volume swells. The audio motif fades out as the harrowing, ten-minute long pretitle sequence commences, only to return at ominous moments throughout the film. The diegetic soundscape of the opening sequence also provokes anxiety, primarily through the absence of sound, establishing the film's highly effective mode of strained attention. We hear only muted, synchronous sounds of the family's cautious movements and the wind and ambient noise of an abandoned main street. At first, we struggle to understand why the family is keeping quiet. Later, we identify with them as they fear every rustle or thud. Asynchronous sound effects are horrifying, and at the end of the opening sequence, the viewer finds out why: one of the family's children plays with a toy that makes a jarringly loud electronic whirr **[Figure 6.46]**. A monster dramatically snatches the boy moments later. Thus, the film's opening sequence

establishes the narrative stakes and causes the audience to experience suspense from even the slightest noise in subsequent scenes.



6.46 ***A Quiet Place*** (2018). The absence of sound that characterizes the film's soundtrack is broken by brief episodes of loud and terrifying action, such as at the end of the pretitle sequence.

A more melodic motif in Marco Beltrami's score isn't introduced until nearly seven minutes into the film, and the first dialogue is spoken aloud after nearly thirty-eight minutes have passed. The sparing use of music and speech makes the soundscape, designed by supervising sound editors Erik Aadahl and Ethan Van der Ryn, all the more unnerving. An imaginative array of terrifying foley effects come from humble sources, like crunching celery and crackling crab legs. The creature sound design is similarly subtle and creepy: the computer-generated monsters emit a series of electrical clicks, whose real-life source — revealed in a behind-the-scenes feature — is a stun gun held to grapes.

Sound technologies are also foregrounded in the film's plot. The father searches for a radio frequency that he hopes will allow him to make contact with other survivors, and he tinkers to repair his daughter's hearing aids **[Figure 6.47]**. After the tragic episode that results in the younger son's death, the mother designs do-it-yourself solutions like padded Monopoly pieces and, later, a rig to mute their newborn baby's cries. The film's sound mix links these technologies directly to the viewer's perception: when a character listens through headphones or a

stethoscope, the audience also hears the music or the heartbeat. Thus, signs of human interiority and emotion are held private, apart from the external threat of the monsters.

A still from the movie, A Quiet Place, shows a man wearing headset in front of a microphone a radio station.

6.47 ***A Quiet Place*** (2018). The father spends hours each day trying to reach other survivors via radio.

This technique of mixing audio according to characters' perspectives aligns the viewer with the eldest child, played by deaf actress Millicent Simmonds. Sometimes the soundtrack goes completely silent when she is onscreen, allowing rare moments of respite. But she remains alert to threats to her environment when she catches sight of the hearing characters' expressions of dread. At other times, we hear shrieking feedback that she is evidently sensing through a cochlear implant. Later in the film, the character's own sensory experience gives her the idea of turning painfully high frequencies against the monsters. The unpleasant sounds to which the characters and the audience are subjected are also excruciating to the creatures.

Unlike most movie sound mixes, *A Quiet Place* marginalizes speech, and yet as the importance of the deaf character's perception indicates, language and communication are nevertheless central to the family drama. The father is able to speak aloud to his son under a waterfall's noisy cascade. Later, he comes to recognize that his daughter needs him to declare his love and forgiveness outright, and he delivers a poignant speech to her in ASL. The viewer, too, must become attuned to gesture and facial expression, mirroring the onscreen images of characters listening attentively to each other.

A Quiet Place was an unlikely box-office hit. Its estimated budget of $17 to $21 million was relatively low for a mainstream studio film in 2018, yet the film earned almost twenty times that much, prompting a sequel. Its novel premise was partly responsible for its success, as was the sound technology in theatrical exhibition. Dolby Laboratories' Atmos sound system, which fills and moves around the theater, combined with the film's unusually sparse soundtrack to create a unique experience for viewers. The sense of fear of excessive noise spread from the movie's characters to the audience, who were notoriously terrified to chew popcorn during the film. Viewers knew that the sounds they made in real life would attract attention — if not from predatory creatures then from their fellow moviegoers experiencing the film as much through sound as through image.

Chapter 6 Review

SUMMARY

- Cinema is an audiovisual medium. Sound plays a key role in enhancing — or challenging — our understanding of images shown onscreen.
- The role of sound has changed along with technology throughout film history.
    - Early "silent" films were often shown with live musical accompaniment and sometimes with narration, sound effects, or actors reciting dialogue.
    - Hollywood rapidly converted to synchronized sound in the late 1920s, requiring new sound equipment to be installed in movie theaters.
    - Subsequent innovations in the 1950s (**stereophonic sound**), the 1970s (Dolby and surround sound), and the 1990s (digital sound) reflected both an attempt to improve sound fidelity and a reaction to other competitive entertainment media, including television, home video, and video games.
- Sound guides our perceptions of cinematic realism.
    - **Synchronous sound** (also called *onscreen sound*) has a visible source in the film. **Asynchronous sound** (also called *offscreen sound*) does not.

    - **Parallel sound** occurs when the soundtrack and image "say the same thing." **Contrapuntal sound** occurs when two different meanings are implied by the sound and the image.
    - **Diegetic sound** has its source in the narrative world of a film. **Nondiegetic sound** does not.
- Sound production is a complex process with many stages.
    - **Sound recording** can take place simultaneously with the filming of a scene.
        - The snap of a **clapperboard** is recorded at the beginning of each take to synchronize sound and image.
        - Microphones for recording synchronous sound may be placed on actors or may be positioned overhead with a long device called a **boom**.
    - **Postproduction sound** is recorded after the fact and then synchronized with onscreen sources.
        - Sound effects may be gathered, produced by sound-effects editors on computers, retrieved from a sound library, or generated by **foley artists**.
        - During **automated dialogue replacement (ADR)**, actors watch the film footage and rerecord their lines to be dubbed into the soundtrack (a process also known as *looping*).
    - **Sound editing** involves selecting and combining music, dialogue, and effects tracks to interact with the image track.
        - **Sound mixing** is the process of adjusting the levels of music, dialogue, and sound effects.

- The three primary elements of film sound are voice, music, and sound effects.
  - The human voice is often central to audiences' understanding of film. In narrative films, speech exposes character motivations and conveys plot information.
    - **Overlapping dialogue** is a technique that makes individual lines less distinct and is often used to approximate the everyday experience of hearing multiple speakers at the same time.
    - A **voice-off** originates from a speaker who can be inferred to be present but who is not visible onscreen.
    - A **voiceover** is a voice whose source is not visible in the frame but acts as the organizing principle behind the film's images, such as the narrator in a documentary film.
  - Music is a crucial element, providing rhythm and deepening emotional responses.
    - Background music, or **underscoring**, literally underscores what is happening dramatically. Noticeable examples are **stingers**, musical cues that force us to notice the significance of something onscreen.
    - Popular songs promote audience participation and identification by appealing to tastes shared by age or ethnic groups.
  - Sound effects are often an important element in creating realism in film.

- Sound contributes to movies' sensory richness and can convey essential meanings.
    - **Sound continuity** describes the range of scoring, sound recording, mixing, and playback processes that strive to unify meaning and experience by subordinating sound to the aims of the narrative. It is conventional in Hollywood films.
    - **Sound montage** reminds us that sound can be creatively manipulated and reflected upon to achieve certain effects.

KEY TERMS

melodrama
stereophonic sound
synchronous sound
asynchronous sound
parallel sound
contrapuntal sound
diegetic sound
nondiegetic sound
diegesis
source music
semidiegetic sound
soundtrack
sound designer
sound recording
clapperboard
boom

direct sound
reflected sound
production sound mixer
postproduction sound
foley artist
room tone
walla
automated dialogue replacement (ADR)
sound editing
sound bridge
spotting
sound mixing
mix
sound reproduction
sound perspective
overlapping dialogue
voice-off
narrator
voiceover
women's picture
score
underscoring
cue
narrative cueing
stinger
mickey-mousing
prerecorded music
music supervisor

sound continuity
sound montage

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PART THREE ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURES

from stories to genres

A still from the movie, Parasite, shows the protagonist sitting with his family on the floor, surrounded by empty pizza carton boxes around them. A partially constructed pizza box lays on the floor between them.

CHAPTER 7

Narrative Films: Telling Stories

- Stories and plots
- Characters
- Narration and narrative point of view
- Classical and alternative narrative traditions

CHAPTER 8

Documentary Films: Representing the Real

- Cultural practices
- Nonfiction and non-narrative images and forms
- Formal strategies and organizations

CHAPTER 9

Animation and Experimental Media: Challenging Form

- Defining animation and experimental media
- Aesthetic histories
- Animation modes
- Formal strategies and organizations

CHAPTER 10

Movie Genres: Conventions, Formulas, and Audience Expectations

- Genre identification
- Genre as cultural ritual
- Prescriptive and descriptive understanding of film types
- Six genres
- Meaning through genre

We go to the movies not just to experience a film's elaborate scenes, brilliant images, dramatic cuts, and rich sounds. We also go for the

gripping suspense of a murder mystery, the fascinating revelations of a documentary, the poetic voyage of a musical score set to abstract images and sounds, and the satisfying iconography of a western. The psychological thriller *Us* (2019) creates a mysterious narrative that slowly uncovers a subtle politics of horror; the South Korean film *Parasite* (2019) fluctuates between psychological tension and unexpected violence; the documentary *Honeyland* (2019) explores the unseen, poetic life of a Macedonian beekeeper; and *The Irishman* (2019) returns to the icons and conventions of the American gangster film but with an atmosphere of elegy and loss.

Besides the stylistic details found in the mise-en-scène, cinematography, editing, and sound, movie experiences are also encounters with larger organizational structures and attractions. Some of us may look first for a good story; others may prefer documentary, experimental films, or films that use animation in creative ways. Some days we may be in the mood for a melodrama; other days we may feel like watching a horror film. Part 3 explores the principal organizations of movies — narrative, documentary, experimental and animated films, and movie genres — each of which, as we will see, arouses certain expectations about the movie we are viewing. Each shapes the world for us into a distinctive kind of experience, offering a particular way of seeing, understanding, and enjoying it.

CHAPTER 7 NARRATIVE FILMS
Telling Stories

A sequence of three stills from three different Wizard of Oz movies.

Description

The first still from the movie, The Wizard of Oz, shows the protagonist Dorothy walking through a meadow on a yellow brick road along with the Tin Man, the Scarecrow, the Cowardly Lion. The second still shows the same characters as portrayed in “The Wiz.” The third still from the movie, Oz, the Great and Powerful shows Glinda flying ahead of Oscar, both encased in a large bubble, across a landscape with mountains.

L. Frank Baum’s 1900 children’s book *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* has been one of the most ubiquitous narratives in American history. Adaptations include a 1902 stage play, 1910 and 1925 silent versions, the famous 1939 film starring Judy Garland, updates like Sam Raimi’s 2013 *Oz the Great and Powerful*, the modernized musical *The Wiz* (1978), and the novel and Broadway show *Wicked* (2003). With a sepia-tone frame questioning Dorothy’s place in Kansas farm life, *The Wizard of Oz* (1939) catapults the heroine into a strange, Technicolor world where she meets the Scarecrow, the Tin Man, and the Cowardly Lion, who then accompany her as she encounters and overcomes a series of obstacles along her way and finally defeats the Wicked Witch of the West. Despite its fantastical elements, the narrative follows a cause-and-effect structure propelled by the protagonist’s goal and eventually concludes in her return to her home and family. Indeed, the basic outline of this narrative might describe the shape of many very different stories, from *Finding Nemo* (2003) to *The Hurt Locker* (2008). At the same time, this particular narrative is also a fine example of how some narratives can approach the status of a cultural myth, shared by many different audiences.

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Movies have thrived on the art and craft of narrative, a story with a particular plot and point of view. At its core, narrative maps the different ways we have learned to make sense of our place in history and the world as well as to communicate with others. Narrative film developed out of a long cultural, artistic, and literary tradition of storytelling that shows characters pursuing goals, confronting obstacles to those goals, and ultimately achieving some kind of closure. In general, narrative follows a three-part structure consisting of a beginning, a middle, and an ending. An established situation is disrupted, and events in the middle of the narrative lead to a restoration of order in the ending.

Storytelling has always been a central part of societies and cultures. Stories spring from both personal and communal memories and reconstruct the events, actions, and emotions of the past through the eyes of the present. They also offer explanations for events and features of the world that may otherwise seem beyond comprehension. In this way, stories strengthen both the memory and the imagination of a society. Many stories — Bible stories, Hindu scriptures, Icelandic sagas, oral tales of indigenous cultures, and well-known stories of historical events (such as the Civil War) and people (such as Martin Luther King Jr.) — are all driven by these

aims. In a sense, stories are both the historical center of a culture and the bonds of a community.

KEY OBJECTIVES

- Recognize the ubiquity of storytelling in film.
- Describe the different historical practices that create the foundations for film narratives.
- Explain how film narratives construct plots that can arrange the events of a story in different ways.
- Identify the ways that film characters motivate actions in a story.
- Break down the ways that plots create different temporal and spatial schemes.
- Describe how narration and narrative point of view determine our understanding of a story.
- Distinguish the differences between classical and alternative narrative traditions.

A Short History of Narrative Film

Over time, stories have appeared in a myriad of material forms and served innumerable purposes, many of which reappear in movie narratives. Some films, like *Little Big Man* (1970) and *Contempt* (1963), make explicit references to the narrative history that precedes them. *Little Big Man*, for instance, depicts the heritage of Native Americans gathered around the fire listening to storytellers recounting the history of their people. *Contempt*, in contrast, struggles with the narrative forms found in Homer's *Odyssey* and those demanded by commercial filmmaking — between telling a tale as an epic poem and as a Hollywood blockbuster **[Figures 7.1a–7.1c]**.

A sequence of three images shows how the Greek epic "Odyssey" has been depicted in three different historical time periods.

7.1a–7.1c *The Odyssey.* The history of narrative invariably reflects the historical pressures and conditions that determine how stories are told. **(a)** Ancient Greek epics, including the renowned *Odyssey*, often were depicted as visual narratives. **(b)** Since medieval times, the

visual arts have incorporated stories and allegories into a single frame — for example, depicting multiple characters and events from the *Odyssey* in one sixteenth-century painting. **(c)** More modern visual arts, like Jean-Luc Godard's *Contempt* (1963), have engaged directly with the history of narrative. Godard's film is about the struggle to adapt the *Odyssey* to the screen.

Description
The first image shows an ancient vase with an engraving of a warrior about to shoot an arrow. The second image shows a sixteenth-century painting that shows several characters and events of the epic in a single frame. The third image is a still from the movie"Contempt" and shows a person's hand holding a clapperboard for the film"Odyssey" in front of a shirtless actor.

To appreciate the richness of film narrative, viewers must keep in mind the unique cultural history of narrative itself. For example, oral narratives, which are spoken or recited aloud, represent a tradition that extends from the campfire to today's spoken word artists. Written narratives, such as Charles Dickens's *Bleak House* (1853), appear in printed form, while graphic narratives develop through a series of images, such as the stories told through lithographs in the eighteenth century and through modern comic books like D.C. Comics' *Wonder Woman* series, which started in 1942.

In these and other examples, the form and material through which a story is told affect aspects of the narrative, facilitating some characteristics of expression and prohibiting others. Oral narratives provide more direct and flexible contact with listeners, allowing a

story to be tailored to an audience and to change from one telling to another. A visual narrative shows the appearance of characters more concretely than a literary one, whereas a literary narrative is able to present characters' thoughts more seamlessly than a visual narrative. A film narrative commonly draws from and combines other narrative traditions, and attending to how a particular film narrative employs the strategies of, say, oral narratives or operatic narratives illustrates the broad and complex history of storytelling embedded in cinematic form.

1900–1920s: Adaptations, Scriptwriters, and Screenplays

Although the first movies usually showed only simple moving images (such as a train arriving at a station), these images often referred to a story behind them. As film form developed, adaptations of well-known stories were a popular choice of filmmakers, much like today's adaptations of comic books and remakes of previous movies. Audiences' familiarity with the characters and plot helped them to follow emerging motion-picture narrative techniques. As early as 1896, the actor Joseph Jefferson represented Rip van Winkle in a brief short. By 1903, a variety of similar film tableaux — a story told through a single image — assumed that audiences would know the larger story behind what was shown on the screen, including Shakespeare's *King John* (1899), *Cinderella* (1900), *Robinson Crusoe* (1902), and *Ali Baba and the Forty*

Thieves (1905) **[Figure 7.2]**. *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, the most popular novel and stage play of the nineteenth century, was adapted for the screen numerous times in the silent film era, once by Edwin S. Porter in 1903 **[Figure 7.3]**. Porter's films were among the first to use editing to tell stories, and by 1906 the movies were becoming a predominantly narrative medium.

A still from the movie, Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves, shows several female characters on a dazzling set filled with various designs on a starlit sky background.

7.2 ***Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves*** (1905). The tableaux of early films rely on imagery that assumes the audience knows the larger story behind the image.

A still from the movie, Uncle Tom's Cabin, shows a man, two women, and a child standing outside a cabin in falling snow.

7.3 *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1903). Edwin S. Porter directed one of numerous silent film adaptations of the most popular nineteenth-century novel and stage play.

These early historical bonds between movies and stories served the development of what we can call the economics of leisure time. In the first decades of the twentieth century, the budding movie industry recognized that stories take time to tell and that an audience's willingness to spend time watching stories makes money for the industry. In these early years, most individuals went to the movies to experience the novelty of "going to the movies" and spending an afternoon with friends or an hour away from work. By 1913, moviemakers recognized that by developing more complex stories they could attract larger audiences, keep them in their seats for longer periods, and charge more than a nickel for admission. Along with the growing cultural prestige of attending films that told serious stories, movies could now sell more time for more money through longer narratives. Cinema quickly established itself among the leading sources of cultural pleasures that included museums, art galleries, and traditional and vaudeville theaters. At the same time, cinema's own history came to be governed by the forms and aims of storytelling.

VIEWING CUE

For the film you recently watched in class, describe as much of the story as you can. What are the main events, the implied events, and the significant and insignificant details of the film's story?

As narrative film developed, two important industrial events stand out — the introduction of screenplays and the advancement of narrative dialogue through sound. Whereas many early silent movies were produced with little advance preparation, the growing number and increasing length of movies from 1907 onward required the use of **screenwriters** (also called *scriptwriters*), who created the film's screenplay, either by beginning with an original treatment and developing the plot structure and dialogue over the span of several versions or by adapting short stories, novels, or other sources. As part of this historical shift, movies' narratives quickly became dependent on a **screenplay** (or *script*), the text from which a movie is made, including dialogue and information about action, settings, shots, and transitions. This shift standardized the elements and structures of movie narratives. A copyright lawsuit regarding an early movie version of *Ben-Hur* (1907) immediately underlined the importance of screenwriters who could develop original narratives.

1927–1950: The Coming of Sound and Classical Hollywood Narrative

The introduction of sound technology and, consequently, dialogue in the late 1920s proved to be one of the most significant advances in the history of film narrative. An industry that needed more verbally driven narratives, Hollywood looked increasingly to New York and other places where literary figures like F. Scott Fitzgerald (who wrote

the screenplay for the 1938 film *Three Comrades*) could be lured into writing new stories and scripts.

Sound affected the cinema in numerous ways, but perhaps most important was that it enabled film narratives to create and develop more intricate characters whose dialogue and vocal intonations added new psychological and social dimensions to film. More intricate characters were used to propel more complex movie plots. In many ways a product of the new narrative possibilities offered by sound, screwball comedies such as *Bringing Up Baby* (1938) feature fast-talking women and men whose verbal dexterity is a measure of their independence and wit **[Figure 7.4]**. Other films of this period use sound devices, such as a whistled tune in Alfred Hitchcock's *The Man Who Knew Too Much* (1934), to make oblique connections between characters and events and to build more subtle kinds of suspense within the narrative.

A still from the movie, Bringing Up Baby, shows Susan Vance driving a car with a man in the passenger's seat and a leopard in the backseat.

7.4 ***Bringing Up Baby*** (1938). The coming of sound showcased the witty dialogue of the fast-talking, independent heroines of screwball comedies. Such characters are epitomized by Susan Vance (played by Katharine Hepburn), whose “baby” in this film is a pet leopard.

The continuing evolution of the relation between sound and narrative helped to solidify and fine-tune the fundamental shape of classical Hollywood narrative in the 1930s and 1940s. During this period, the structure of this increasingly dominant narrative form became firmly established according to three basic features: (1) the narrative focuses on one or two central characters, (2) these characters move a linear plot forward, and (3) the action develops according to a realistic cause-and-effect logic. A trio of movies produced in 1939, often heralded as Hollywood's golden year — *Gone with the Wind, Stagecoach*, and *The Wizard of Oz* — illustrate sound-era movie narratives as modern-age myths and, despite their many differences, describe narrative variations on this classical Hollywood structure. During these years, the Hollywood studio system grew in size and power, and it provided a labor force, a central producer system, and a global market that created an extraordinarily efficient industrial system for storytelling. This system favored the development of narrative genres, such as musicals and westerns, that met audience expectations for repetition and variation (see Chapter 10).

Also during this period, the introduction and advancement of specific movie technologies — for example, deep-focus cinematography and Technicolor processes — offered ways to convey and complicate the narrative information provided by specific images. Although the plot structure of the classical narrative

remained fully intact, these technologies allowed movies to explore new variations on narrative in the atmosphere of a scene or in the dramatic tensions among characters.

In 1930, the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America (headed by Will H. Hays from 1922 to 1945) adopted the strict Production Code, a set of guidelines for what was considered morally acceptable to depict in films, including prescribing that villains be punished in the end. Film narratives during the 1930s turned more conspicuously to literary classics for stories that could provide adult plots acceptable to censors. These classics included *Pride and Prejudice* (1940) and *Wuthering Heights* (1939).

World War II (1939–1945) significantly jolted classical Hollywood narratives. The stark and often horrific events that occurred during the war raised questions about whether the classic narrative formulas of linear plots, clear-headed characters, and neat and logical endings could adequately capture the period's far messier and more confusing realities. If the narrative of *The Wizard of Oz* followed the yellow brick road that led a character home, the war-scarred narrative of *The Best Years of Our Lives* (1946) poignantly questioned what path to follow and even doubted whether one could ever go home again **[Figure 7.5]**.

A still from the movie, The Best Years of Our Lives, shows a veteran holding a glass of milk with prosthetic limbs while a young girl standing beside him, looks up at him.

7.5 ***The Best Years of Our Lives*** (1946). This postwar narrative questions the assumption that a return home will bring a happy ending.

1950–1980: Art Cinema

The global trauma of World War II not only challenged the formulaic Hollywood storytelling style but also gave rise to an innovative art cinema that emerged in the 1950s and 1960s in Europe, Japan, India, Latin America, and elsewhere. This new form of cinema questioned many of the cultural perspectives and values that existed before the war. Produced by such directors as Ingmar Bergman, Federico Fellini, and Agnès Varda, European art cinema experimented with new narrative structures that typically subverted or overturned classical narrative models by featuring characters without direction, seemingly illogical actions, and sometimes surreal events. In *Cléo from 5 to 7* (1962), for instance, Varda restricts the narrative to two hours in the day of a singer, capturing the real-time details of her life. Although the protagonist fears a cancer diagnosis, the narrative eschews melodrama for the joys of wandering through the everyday **[Figure 7.6]**.

A still from the movie, Cleo from 5 to 7, shows a young woman walking amid the crowd of a street lined with stores.

7.6 ***Cléo from 5 to 7*** (1962). Agnès Varda's narrative restricts itself to two hours of real time as it documents an afternoon in the life of a young woman in Paris.

Influencing later new wave cinemas such as the New German Cinema of the 1970s and the New Hollywood cinema of the 1970s and 1980s, these films intentionally subverted traditional narrative forms such as linear progression of the plot and the centrality of a specific protagonist. In addition, these narratives often turned away from the objective point of view of realist narratives to create more individual styles and tell stories that were more personal than public. Fellini's *8½* (1963), for instance, has an unmistakable autobiographical dimension as it recounts the struggles of a movie director wrestling with his anxieties about work and the memories that haunt him.

1980s–Present: Franchises, Narrative Reflexivity, and Games

Contemporary movies represent a wide variety of narrative practices, but three can be identified as particularly significant and widespread in recent decades. Reflecting different technological, artistic, and industrial influences, these three narrative forms create worlds in which multiple stories unfold, reflect back on the process of making films, or mimic the interactivity of video games.

With the success of *Star Wars* (1977) and *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (1981), blockbuster franchises made their mark on Hollywood movie culture, coming to dominate the market from the late twentieth century to the present. Often set in fantastical worlds or among

branded superhero characters, franchises involve viewers with a succession of interrelated stories while immersing them in a fictional universe that extends to other media, product tie-ins, and related experiences. Many have roller coaster–like narratives with spectacular effects, evoking the physical and psychological thrills associated with amusement park rides. The *Pirates of the Caribbean* movie series (2006–2017) is actually based on a Disneyland ride. Even the *Harry Potter* films (2001–2011), based on J. K. Rowling's bestselling book series, at times seem to aspire to the narrative-ride model, complete with elaborate action sequences and IMAX-ready spectacle that became the basis for a theme park experience at Universal Studios in Orlando, Florida. Superhero films, which became ubiquitous in the 2000s as computer-generated visual effects became more sophisticated, similarly depend on extensive action sequences and enthusiastic fan involvement based on knowledge of characters' traits, backstories, and relationships within their branded worlds. The *Star Wars* franchise and the Marvel Cinematic Universe, both acquired by Disney near the beginning of the 2010s, became the most expansive film franchises of that decade, each with more than a dozen films and countless tie-in toys, books, games, TV series, and virtual-reality experiences at Disney World.

In the practice of narrative reflexivity, filmmakers both tell stories and call attention to how they are telling those stories or how these stories are a product of certain narrative techniques and perspectives. *Adaptation* (2002) is thus a film about a screenwriter's

struggles to adapt a *New Yorker* essay on orchids to the formulas of a Hollywood narrative. Meanwhile, replete with references to earlier films and narrative conventions, Quentin Tarantino's *Inglourious Basterds* (2009) is a self-conscious film fantasy about the killing of Nazi leaders during the screening of a film **[Figure 7.7]**.

A still shows Adolph Hitler posing for an artist painting a huge portrait of him in the movie, Inglourious Basterds.

7.7 ***Inglourious Basterds*** (2009). Contemporary narratives like this film are highly self-conscious and reflexive about the historical sources and materials that construct their stories.

As films moved into the digital age, a third tendency arose: structuring stories with the cues and options of video gaming, making films and their marketing campaigns a kind of interactive game for audiences. Some movies have increasingly implicitly or explicitly constructed stories as interactive explorations of space. In Doug Liman's *Edge of Tomorrow* (2014), the hero dies combating an alien invasion over and over, waking to attempt his mission again, similar to a video game character who may die and then reattempt a challenging level many times. The excitement of Steven Spielberg's *Ready Player One* (2018) takes place within a virtual-reality game **[Figure 7.8]**. The escalating convergences and exchanges among games, virtual-reality experiences, and films have the potential to challenge cinema's narrative conventions.

A close up of a man wearing virtual reality headgear, which mirrors an image of a hand reaching for a glowing blue pyramid with the text “PARZIVAL” at the top center.

7.8 ***Ready Player One*** (2018). Just as the film’s characters spend much of their time within the virtual-reality space OASIS, viewers interact with the film’s narrative like a game.

HISTORY CLOSE UP

Salt of the Earth (1954)

A still from the movie, Salt of the Earth, shows Esperanza Quintero standing amidst a group of people and speaking. The people around her sit and look on.

Turning actual events into a narrative often makes them more compelling. Characters with whom we can identify, sharply drawn conflict, and suspense

about the outcome make *Salt of the Earth* (1954, right), based on a 1951 miners' strike in New Mexico, a gripping and deeply moving story. But despite these traditional narrative elements, the film broke with Hollywood convention in many ways. Shot on location with a mix of actors and Chicano/a community members, the story is told through the eyes of Esperanza, a young mother married to a striking miner. Initially meek, Esperanza learns to voice her concerns about issues affecting women in their company town, built on land that formerly belonged to Mexico. When the men are banned from picketing, the women walk the line instead. The story proceeds on both personal and political levels, as Esperanza and her husband, Juan, negotiate their roles and Esperanza takes a public role in the labor struggle. Both narrative threads rely on heroic acts by ordinary Americans about whom few Hollywood movies are made. Because the script was drafted in collaboration with the participants and directed by Herbert J. Biberman, one of the "Hollywood Ten" who were jailed for refusing to testify in congressional hearings into whether film industry professionals were current or former members of the American Communist Party, the film plays a role in another fraught narrative about American life — the history of censorship. The set was threatened while the film was in production, and anti-Communist unions blocked laboratories from printing it and projectionists from showing it. Not until many years after the film was made did it become recognized as a deeply American narrative.

The Elements of Narrative Film

Narrative is universal, but it also is infinitely variable. The origins of cinema storytelling in other narrative forms and texts, the evolution of narrative strategies across film history, and the distinct narrative traditions across cultures give a sense of this variety. However, we can identify the common elements of narrative and some of the characteristic ways the film medium deploys them.

Stories and Plots

The main features of any kind of narrative are the story, characters, plot, and narration. A **story** is the subject matter or raw material of a narrative. In a story, actions and events — usually perceived in terms of a beginning, a middle, and an end — are ordered chronologically and focus on one or more **characters**, the individuals who motivate the events and perform the actions of the story. Stories tend to be summarized easily, as in "the tale of a man's frontier life on the Nebraska prairie" or "the story of a woman confronting the violence of her past in Pakistan." In the next section, we discuss characters in detail.

The **plot** is the narrative ordering of the events of the story as they appear in the actual work, selected and arranged according to particular temporal, spatial, generic, causal, or other patterns. In

one story, the plot may include the smallest details in the life of a character; in another story, it may highlight only major, cataclysmic events. One plot may present a story as progressing forward step-by-step from the beginning to the end, and another may present the same story by moving backward in time. One plot may describe a story as the product of the desires and drives of a character, whereas another might suggest that events take place outside the control of that character. Although the story of John F. Kennedy's life and death are well known, movies depicting these events feature very different plots. Oliver Stone's *JFK* (1991) focuses on New Orleans district attorney Jim Garrison's investigation of conspiracy theories around the death, using a bewildering array of footage to unsettle our historical certainties. *Thirteen Days* (2001) is a telescopic narrative covering the 1962 Cuban missile crisis, creating drama by focusing on a president's character under pressure, even though the outcome is already known to viewers. Finally, *Jackie* (2016) shifts emphasis to the first lady, covering her life in the days after the assassination.

From early films like Edwin S. Porter's *Life of an American Fireman* (1903), regarded as one of the first significant narrative films, to modern movies like Christopher Nolan's *Memento* (2000), with its reverse chronology, movies have relied on the viewer's involvement in the narrative tension between story and plot to create suspense, mystery, and interest. Even in the short and simple rescue narrative of Porter's film **[Figures 7.9a–7.9d]**, some incidental details are

omitted, such as the actual raising of ladders to rescue the people inside the burning building. To add to the urgency and energy of the narrative, the rescue is shown sequentially from two different camera setups, a device that confused later audiences. In *Memento*, the tension between plot and story is more obvious and dramatic. This unusual plot, about a man without a short-term memory, begins with a murder and proceeds backward in time through a series of short episodes that unveil fragments of information about who the man is and why he committed the murder. In other films, we know the story; what interests us is discovering the particular ways the plot constructs that story.

A sequence of four stills, (a), (b), (c), and (d) from the movie, Life of an American Fireman.

7.9a–7.9d ***Life of an American Fireman*** (1903). This story proceeds from a fire alarm being sounded to firefighters racing through the streets, to the rescue, with one event — the rescue of a woman via ladder — shown from two different perspectives.

Description
Still (a) shows a few firefighters rushing from their beds to slide down a pole at the fire station.

Still (b) shows firefighters racing through the streets in horse-drawn carriages with steam pumper fire engines.

Still (c) shows a firefighter carrying a woman from a bedroom of a burning building.

Still (d) shows a firefighter climbing down a ladder with the woman draped over his back with her arms wrapped around him. The ladder is held by two other firefighters below, and two more firefighters spray water into the other windows of the burning house.

Characters

The first characters portrayed in films were principally bodies on display or in motion — a famous actor posing, a person running, a figure performing a menial task. When movies began to tell stories, however, characters became the central vehicle for the actions, and with the advent of the Hollywood star system around 1910, distinctions among characters developed rapidly. From the 1896 *Lone Fisherman* to the 1920 *Pollyanna* (featuring Mary Pickford), film characters evolved from amusing moving bodies to figures that had specific narrative functions and were portrayed by adored actors whose popularity made them nearly mythic figures. With the

introduction of sound films in 1927, characters and their relationships were increasingly drawn according to traditions of literary realism and psychological complexity. Today the evolution of character presentation continues as the voices of real actors are adapted to animated figures and plots. Throughout all these historical incarnations, characters have remained one of the most immediate yet under analyzed dimensions of the movies.

Character Roles

Characters are either central or minor figures who anchor the events in a film. They can propel the plot by fulfilling a particular character function, such as protagonist, antagonist, or helper — roles that recur across many plots. More complex characters motivate narrative events through specific situations or traits. Characters are commonly identified and understood through aspects of their appearance, gestures, actions, and dialogue; the comments of other characters; as well as such incidental but important features as their names or clothes.

In many narrative films, a character's inferred emotional and intellectual make-up motivates specific actions that consequently define that character. His or her stated or implied wishes and fears produce events that cause certain effects or other events to take place. Thus, the actions, behaviors, and desires of characters create the causal logic favored in **classical film narrative**, Hollywood's

dominant style of narrative filmmaking in which characters' goals propel a linear plot toward closure. In *The Wizard of Oz* (1939), Dorothy's desire to "go home" — to find her way back to Kansas — leads her through various encounters and dangers that create friendships and fears, and these events, in turn, lead to others, such as Dorothy's fight to retrieve the witch's broom. In the end, she returns home joyfully. The character of Dorothy is thus defined first by her emotional desire and will to go home and then by the persistence and resourcefulness that eventually allow her to achieve that goal **[Figure 7.10]**.

A still from the movie, The Wizard of Oz, shows the rear view of the protagonist Dorothy walking through a meadow along with the Tin Man, the Scarecrow, and the Cowardly Lion toward the Emerald City.

7.10 ***The Wizard of Oz*** (1939). Narrative cause-and-effect logic finds Dorothy and her new companions on the yellow brick road, heading toward the Emerald City.

Most film characters are a combination of both ordinary and extraordinary features. This blend of fantasy and realism has always been an important movie formula: it creates characters that are recognizable in terms of our experiences and exceptional in ways that make them interesting to us. The complexities of certain film characters can be attributed to this blending and balancing. For example, the title characters of the biographical *Queen of Katwe* (2016), *Milk* (2008), and *Lincoln* (2012) — Phiona Mutesi, a young girl from a slum in Kampala, Uganda, who became a chess champion; Harvey Milk, the activist politician who fought for gay rights in San Francisco; and the American president attempting to broker an antislavery legislation deal — all combine extraordinary and ordinary characteristics **[Figures 7.11a–7.11c]**. Even when film characters belong to fantasy genres, as with the tough but vulnerable heroine of *Alien* (1979), understanding them means appreciating how that balance between the ordinary and the extraordinary is achieved.

A sequence of three stills, labeled (a), (b), and (c) shows scenes from three biographical movies.

7.11a–7.11c Biographical film characters. These characters based on actual people — from **(a)** *Queen of Katwe* (2016), **(b)** *Milk* (2008), and **(c)** *Lincoln* (2012) — represent a balance of the ordinary and the extraordinary.

Description
Still (a) from movie, Queen of Katwe, shows an African woman admiring a trophy.

Still (b) from the movie, Milk, shows Sean Penn giving a passionate speech.

Still (c) from the movie, Lincoln, shows the actor portraying Abraham Lincoln sitting on the porch of a cabin.

Character Coherence, Depth, and Grouping

No matter how ordinary or extraordinary, unique or typical a character is, narrative traditions tend to require **character coherence** — consistency and coherence in a character's behaviors, emotions, and thoughts. Character coherence is the product of psychological, historical, or other expectations that see people (and thus characters in fictional narratives) as fundamentally consistent and unique. We usually evaluate a character's coherence according to one or more of the following three assumptions or models:

- *Values*. The character coheres in terms of one or more abstract values, such as when a character becomes defined through his or her overwhelming determination or treachery.

- *Actions*. The character acts out a logical relation between his or her implied inner or mental life and visible actions, as when a sensitive character acts in a remarkably generous way.
- *Behaviors*. The character reflects social and historical assumptions about normal or abnormal behavior, as when a fifteenth-century Chinese peasant woman acts submissively before a man with social power.

Defined within a realist tradition, the character Sergeant William James in Kathryn Bigelow's *The Hurt Locker* (2008) is part of a specialist bomb squad group in the Iraq War. His reckless behavior as he toys with mortal danger and death contrasts with his obsessive countdown of the days until he can return home. Questions about what drives and explains this character become part of the film's powerful depiction of war. When he finally returns home, only to quickly reenlist to return to Iraq, this complicated character seems revealed as one who coheres around a death wish of sorts or at least around the addictive excitement of risking death **[Figure 7.12]**.

A still from the movie, “The Hurt Locker, shows Sergeant William James in the passenger seat of a military truck.

7.12 ***The Hurt Locker*** (2008). The contradictory behavior of Sergeant William James coheres around his addiction to danger.

Inconsistent, contradictory, or divided characters subvert one or more patterns of coherence. Although inconsistent characters occasionally may be the result of poor characterization, some films intentionally create an inconsistent or contradictory character as a way of challenging our sympathies and understanding. In films like *Desperately Seeking Susan* (1985) — about a bored suburban housewife, Roberta, who switches identities with an offbeat and mysterious New Yorker — characters complicate or subvert the expectation of coherence by taking on contradictory personalities. *Mulholland Drive* (2001) dramatizes this instability when its two characters become mirror images of each other. In its tale of an amnesiac woman and a young actress who become entangled in a mysterious plot, fundamental notions about character coherence and stability are undermined **[Figure 7.13]**.

A still from the movie, Mulholland Drive, shows two women sitting on a couch. One of them is talking to the other while the other looks into the distance with tears welling up in her eyes.

7.13 ***Mulholland Drive*** (2001). The double characters of the amnesiac and the young actress complicate character coherence.

Film characterization inevitably reflects historical and cultural values. Historically, the preponderance of stories considered universal have featured male heroes. Hollywood has also traditionally tended to marginalize stories about women and girls. In 2018, thirty-nine of the one hundred most successful Hollywood films had female leads or co-leads. While still a minority of leading roles, this number represents a significant increase over 2015, when only seventeen top-grossing films featured women in leading roles — a sign of increasing pressure on Hollywood regarding diversity and inclusion. The success of *The Hunger Games* films (2012–2015), starring Jennifer Lawrence as heroine Katniss Everdeen, helped prove that female leads could carry the kind of franchise action films that Hollywood increasingly relies on. Rey, the protagonist of the *Star Wars* sequel trilogy (2015–2019) played by Daisy Ridley, continued this trend.

In Western cultures, movies tend to promote the concept of the singular character, a unique individual distinguished by specific features and isolated from a social group. For example, the unique character of Jason Bourne in the series of *Bourne* films (2002–2016) is a product of a complex mixture of traits that reflect a modern notion of the advanced individual as one who is emotionally and intellectually complex and one of a kind. **Character depth** is the pattern of psychological and social features that distinguish a character as rounded and complex in a way that approximates realistic human personalities. It becomes a way of referring to

personal mysteries and intricacies that deepen and layer the dimensions of a complicated personality. For example, the surface actions of Louise in *Thelma & Louise* (1991) — she refuses to drive through Texas to travel to Mexico — clearly hide a deep trauma (a presumed sexual assault) that she tries unsuccessfully to repress. The uniqueness of a character may be a product of one or two attributes — such as exceptional bravery, massive wealth, or superpowers — that separate him or her from all the other characters in the film. Sometimes we are led to question the value placed on singularity as a product of a social system that prizes individuality and psychological depth. After all, Hannibal Lecter in *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991) and in its prequel and sequel is one of the most singular and exceptional characters in film history. Our troubling identification with him (at least in part) goes to the social heart of our admiration for such uniqueness.

Character grouping refers to the social arrangements of characters in relation to one another. Traditional narratives usually feature one or two **protagonists** (characters identified as the positive forces in a film) and one or two prominent **antagonists** (characters who oppose the protagonists as negative forces in a film). For example, the women drawn together by their husbands' deaths in *Widows* (2018) are forced to take action by unexpected antagonists **[Figure 7.14]**. As with the sympathetic relationship between a German officer and a French prisoner in *Grand Illusion* (1937), this oppositional grouping of characters can sometimes be complicated or blurred.

A still from the movie, Widows, shows a group of four women looking at each other intently.

7.14 ***Widows*** (2018). The unlikely protagonists of this heist film do not immediately know whom they are up against.

VIEWING CUE

In the film you are watching for class, select a character that you might define as singular. Does that singularity indicate something about the values of the film? Does the character seem coherent? How?

In a film featuring an ensemble cast, such as *The Breakfast Club* (1985), the conflicting relationships and competing interests among a group of interrelated characters often provide much of the film's drama. Surrounding, contrasting with, and supporting the protagonists and antagonists, **minor characters** (also called *secondary characters*) are usually associated with specific character groups. In *Do the Right Thing* (1989), Da Mayor wanders around the edges of the central action throughout most of the film. Although he barely affects the events of the story, Da Mayor represents an older generation whose idealistic hopes have been dashed but whose fundamental compassion and wisdom stand out amid racial anger and strife.

Social hierarchies of class, gender, race, age, and geography, among other determinants, also come into play in the arrangements of film characters. Traditional movie narratives have focused on male protagonists and on heterosexual pairings in which males have claimed more power and activity than females. Another traditional character hierarchy places children and elderly individuals in subordinate positions. Especially in older mainstream films,

characters from racial minorities have existed on the fringes of the action and have occupied social ranks markedly below those of the white protagonists. In *Gone with the Wind* (1939), for example, character hierarchy subordinates African Americans to whites. When social groupings are more important than individual characters, the collective character of the individuals in the group is defined primarily in terms of the group's action and personality. Sergei Eisenstein's *Battleship Potemkin* (1925) fashions a drama of collective characters, crafting a political showdown among czarist oppressors, rebellious sailors, and sympathetic civilians in Odessa. Modern films may shuffle those hierarchies noticeably so that groups like women, children, and the poor assume new power and position, as in *Winter's Bone* (2010), a story about a young woman determined to find her lost father in a destitute Ozark Mountain region ravaged by a methamphetamine drug culture **[Figure 7.15]**.

A still from the movie, Winter's Bone, shows a young woman walking with two kids and two dogs along a dirt road.

7.15 ***Winter's Bone*** (2010). The remarkable grit and determination of a young woman defy both class and gender expectations.

Character Types

Character types share distinguishing features with other similar characters and are prominent within particular narrative traditions such as fairy tales, genre films, and comic books. A single trait or multiple traits may define character types. These may be physical, psychological, or social traits. Tattoos and a shaved head may identify a character as a "skinhead" or punk, and another character's use of big words and a nasal accent may represent a New England snob.

VIEWING CUE

What kinds of social hierarchies are suggested by the character groupings in a film you have recently viewed?

We might recognize the singularity of Warren Beatty's performance as Clyde in *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967), yet as we watch more movies and compare different protagonists, we can recognize him as a character type who — like James Cagney as gangster Tom Powers in *The Public Enemy* (1931) and Bruce Willis as John McClane in the *Die Hard* series (1988–2013) — can be described as a "tough yet sensitive outsider." By offering various emotional, intellectual, social, and psychological points of entry into a movie, character types include such figures as "the innocent," such as Elizabeth Taylor's Velvet Brown in *National Velvet* (1944); "the villain," such as Robert De

Niro's Max Cady in Martin Scorsese's remake of *Cape Fear* (1991); and the "heartless career woman," such as the imperious fashion editor played by Meryl Streep in *The Devil Wears Prada* (2006) **[Figure 7.16]**. These and other character types can often be subclassified in even more specific terms — such as "the damsel in distress" or "the psychotic killer."

A still from the movie, The Devil Wears Prada, shows Miranda Priestly giving a stern look to someone beyond the frame while a man and a woman next to her look surprised.

7.16 ***The Devil Wears Prada*** (2006). The “heartless career woman” character type is depicted by Meryl Streep in her role as imperious fashion editor Miranda Priestly.

Character types usually convey clear psychological or social connotations and imply cultural values about gender, race, social class, or age that a film engages and manipulates. Tina Turner is portrayed as a strong black woman by Angela Bassett in *What's Love Got to Do with It?* (1993). In *Life Is Beautiful* (1997), the father (played by director Roberto Benigni) jokes and pirouettes in the tradition of comic clowns like Charlie Chaplin or Jacques Tati, outsiders whose physical games undermine the social and intellectual pretensions around them. In *Life Is Beautiful*, however, this comic type must live through the horrors of a Nazi concentration camp with his son, and in this context the character type becomes transformed into a different figure — a heroic type who physically and spiritually saves his child **[Figure 7.17]**.

A still from the movie, Life is Beautiful, shows a man in striped prison clothes lean forward to eye level with a young boy over. Despite being streaked with sweat, the man smiles as he speaks to the boy.

7.17 ***Life Is Beautiful*** (1997). The “comic” character type, depicted by Roberto Benigni in his role as a prisoner in a Nazi concentration camp, is transformed into the “hero” type.

The relationship between film stars and character types has been a central part of film history and practice. For over a hundred years, the construction of character in film has interacted with the personae of recognizable movie stars. Rudolph Valentino played exotic romantic heroes in *The Sheik* (1921) and *Son of the Sheik* (1926), and his offscreen image was similarly molded to make him appear more exotic, with his enthusiastic female fans differentiating little between character and star. In *Meet the Parents* (2000) and its sequels, Robert De Niro's character draws on familiar aspects of the actor's tough-guy persona — for example, his role as a young Vito Corleone in *The Godfather: Part II* (1974) or as Travis Bickle in *Taxi Driver* (1976) — to humorous effect. Our experience of stars — garnered through publicity and promotion, television, social media, and media criticism — resembles the process by which characters are positioned in narratives. Elements of characterization — clothing, personal relationships, perceptions of coherence or development — factor into our interest in stars and, in turn, into the ways that aspects of stars' offscreen images affect their film portrayals. One way to contemplate the effects of star image on character types is to imagine a familiar film cast differently. Would *Cast Away*'s (2000) story of everyman encountering his environment be the same if, instead of Tom Hanks, Jack Nicholson or Beyoncé Knowles played the lead?

Archetypes

Film characters are also presented as figurative types, characters so exaggerated or reduced that they no longer seem at all realistic and instead seem more like abstractions or emblems, like the White Witch in *The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* (2006). In some movies, a figurative character appears as an **archetype**, a spiritual, psychological, or cultural model expressing certain virtues, values, or timeless realities — such as when a character represents evil or oppression. In *Battleship Potemkin* (1925), a military commander unmistakably represents social oppression, and a baby in a carriage becomes the emblem of innocence oppressed. In different ways, figurative types present characters as intentionally flat, without the traditional depth and complexity of realistically drawn characters, and often for a specific purpose — to create a comic effect, as with the absentminded professor in *Back to the Future* (1985); to make an intellectual argument, as in *Battleship Potemkin*; or to populate a world of superheroes, as in *Batman v. Superman: Dawn of Justice* (2016).

Stereotypes

Sometimes a film reduces an otherwise realistic character to a set of static traits that identify him or her in terms of a social, physical, or cultural category — such as the "mammy" character in *Imitation of Life* (1934) **[Figure 7.18]** or the vicious and inhuman Vietnamese in *The Deer Hunter* (1978). This figurative type becomes a **stereotype** — a character type that simplifies and standardizes perceptions that

one group holds about another, often less numerous, powerful, or privileged group. Stereotypes are ahistorical, resistant to change, and offensive because marginalized social groups are not represented in other ways. Louise Beavers's performance as Delilah Johnson in *Imitation of Life* is substantive enough to complicate the way the role is written, but the actress nevertheless found herself fighting the "mammy" stereotype through her entire career. The wise karate master played by Pat Morita in *The Karate Kid* (1984) and the menacing Arab brandishing a scimitar in *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (1981) have both been criticized for drawing on stereotypes. But stereotypes persist as cultural and ideological shorthand in contemporary cinema. Stereotypes like the demanding immigrant parent and the gay male best friend may be deployed in comedy for their immediacy of reference, implicating viewers in their assumptions about others. Because stereotypes communicate histories of inequality in immediately recognizable ways, they can raise questions that carefully drawn positive characterizations often cover over. The shouting match staged among the ethnic occupants of the same Brooklyn neighborhood in Spike Lee's *Do the Right Thing* (1989) addresses the difficulty of thinking outside these formulations. Diversity of stories and storytellers is key to displacing stereotypes.

A still from the movie, Imitation of Life, shows a white couple sitting at a table and talking to their African American housekeeper wearing a long dress and apron.

7.18 ***Imitation of Life*** (1934). The “mammy” stereotype is identified by the black housekeeper’s subservient role and dowdy costumes.

Character Development

Finally, film characters usually change over the course of a realist film and thus require us to evaluate and revise our understanding of them as they develop. In a conventional story, characters are often understood or measured by the degree to which they change and learn from their experiences. Both the changes and a character's reaction to them determine much about the character and the narrative as a whole. We follow characters through this process of **character development**, which is shown in the patterns through which characters in a film move from one mental, physical, or social state to another. In Hitchcock's *Rear Window* (1954), the beautiful Lisa changes from a seemingly passive socialite to an active detective under the stress of investigating a murder mystery. In *Juno* (2007), the drama of a bright, sardonic sixteen-year-old's newly discovered pregnancy becomes less about a social or moral crisis in the community and more about her own self-discovery of the meaning of love, family, and friendship. The out-of-wedlock son of champion boxer Apollo Creed, Donnie Johnson, trains with and becomes a key support for his father's former rival Rocky Balboa, making a legacy for himself even as he is persuaded to take on his father's name **[Figure 7.19]**.

A still from the movie, Creed, shows Rocky Balboa patting Adonis Johnson's shoulder inside a boxing ring.

7.19 ***Creed*** (2015). With a familiar plot about an underdog boxer, this new take on the *Rocky* series (1976–2018) engages the viewer through character development.

Character development follows four general schemes — external and internal changes and progressive and regressive development.

External Change

External change is typically a physical alteration, as when we watch a character grow taller or gray with age. Commonly overlooked as merely a realistic description of a character's growth, exterior change can signal other key changes in the meaning of a character. Similar to the female protagonist in *Pygmalion* (1938) and *My Fair Lady* (1964), the main character in *The Devil Wears Prada* (2006), Andy, is a naive recent college graduate who struggles with her first job at a fashion magazine, and her personal and social growth and maturation can be measured by her increasingly fashionable outfits.

Internal Change

Internal change measures the character's internal transformation, such as when a character slowly becomes bitter after experiencing numerous hardships or becomes less materially ambitious after gaining more of a spiritual sense of the world. In *Mildred Pierce* (1945), there is minimal external change in the appearance of the main character besides her costumes, but her consciousness about her identity dramatically changes — from a submissive housewife and doting mother to a bold businesswoman, to a confused, if not contrite, socialite.

Progressive and Regressive Development

As part of these external and internal developments, progressive character development occurs with an improvement or advancement in some quality of the character. Regressive character development indicates a loss of or return to some previous state or a deterioration from the present state. For most viewers of *The Devil Wears Prada*, Andy grows into a more complex and more admirable woman. Mildred Pierce's path resembles for many a return to her originally submissive role.

Using these four schemes to understand character development can be a complex and sometimes even contradictory process. Some characters may seem to progress materially but regress spiritually, for instance. Other characters may not develop at all or may resist development throughout a film. Character development is frequently symptomatic of the larger society in which characters live. When the boy Oskar in Volker Schlöndorff's *The Tin Drum* (1979) suddenly refuses to grow at all, his distorted physical and mental development reflects the new Nazi society that then was developing in Germany **[Figure 7.20]**.

A still from the movie, The Tin Drum, shows a little boy sitting by a railing and playing a drum.

7.20 ***The Tin Drum*** (1979). Oskar's arrested character development is a symptom of the new Nazi society.

Diegetic and Nondiegetic Elements

Most narratives involve two kinds of materials — those related to the story and those not related to the story. The film's **diegesis** is the world of the film's story (its characters, places, and events), including what is shown and what is implied to have taken place. The diegesis of Steven Spielberg's *Lincoln* (2012) includes characters and events explicitly revealed in the narrative, such as Abraham Lincoln's negotiations with lawmakers to pass an antislavery bill. However, the film's diegesis also includes viewers' knowledge of other unseen figures and events from American history, including the final battles of the Civil War and Lincoln's impending assassination. The extent to which we find the film realistic or convincing, creative or manipulative, depends on our recognition of the richness and coherence of the diegetic world surrounding the story.

VIEWING CUE

Describe the diegesis of the film you just watched in class. Which events are excluded or merely implied when that diegesis becomes presented as a narrative?

The notion of diegesis is critical to our understanding of film narrative because it forces us to consider those elements of the story that the narration chooses to include or not include in the plot — and to consider *why* these elements are included or excluded.

Despite the similarity of information in a plot and a story, plot selection and omission describe the exchange by which plot constructs and shapes a story from its diegesis. Consider a film about social unrest and revolution in Russia at the beginning of the twentieth century. Because the diegesis of that event includes a number of events and many characters, what should be selected, and what should be omitted? Faced with this question for his film on the 1905 revolution, Sergei Eisenstein reduced the diegesis to a single uprising on a battleship near the Odessa steps and called the film *Battleship Potemkin* (1925).

Information in the narrative can be nondiegetic. A **nondiegetic insert** is an insert that depicts an action, an object, or a title originating outside the space and time of the narrative world. Material used to tell the story that does not relate to the diegesis and its world includes background music and credits. These dimensions of a narrative indirectly add to a story and affect how viewers participate in or understand it. With silent films, nondiegetic information is sometimes part of the intertitles — frames that print the dialogue of the characters and occasionally comment on the action — as when D. W. Griffith repeatedly inserts a line from Walt Whitman ("Out of the cradle endlessly rocking") into his complex narrative *Intolerance* (1916).

Diegetic soundtracks include sound sources that can be located in the story, whereas nondiegetic soundtracks are commonly musical

scores or other arrangements of noise and sound whose source is not found in the story. Most moviegoers are familiar with the ominously thumping soundtrack of *Jaws* (1975) that announces the unseen presence of the great white shark. In this way, the story punctuates its development to quicken our attention and create suspenseful anticipation of the next event **[Figure 7.21]**.

A still shows a silhouette of a person swimming during night.

7.21 ***Jaws*** (1975). In the opening sequence, Chrissie goes swimming during a late-night beach party. At first, all is tranquil, but the ominous thumping in the soundtrack

foreshadows her violent death. This sound is used throughout the film to signal the presence of the shark.

As you view the next film for class, identify the most important nondiegetic materials, and analyze how they might emphasize certain key themes or ideas.

Credits — a list at the end of a film of all the personnel involved in a film production, including cast, crew, and executives — are another nondiegetic element of the narrative. Sometimes seen at the beginning and sometimes at the end of a movie, credits introduce the actors, producers, technicians, and other individuals who have worked on the film. Hollywood movies today open with the names of famous stars, the director, and the producers, and their closing credits identify the secondary players and technicians. How this information is presented, especially in the opening credits, can suggest ways of looking at the story and its themes. In *Se7en* (1995), for instance, the celebrated opening credits graphically anticipate a dark story about the efforts of two detectives to track down a diabolical serial killer. Filmed in a suitably grainy and fragmented style and set to the sounds of a pulsating industrial soundtrack, the opening credits depict the obsessive mind of a maniac as he crafts morbid scrapbooks, providing both atmosphere and expository narrative information **[Figure 7.22]**.

A still shows the grainy opening credits from the movie, Seven (the v is replaced with the number 7), shows the bright white title is highlighted against a shiny black background.

7.22 ***Se7en*** (1995). The presentation of the credits in a film can suggest ways for viewing its story and its unfolding themes.

Narrative Patterns of Time

Individuals and societies create patterns of time as ways of measuring and valuing experience. Repeating holidays once a year, marking births and deaths with symbolic rituals, and rewarding work for time invested are some of the ways we organize and value time. Similarly, narrative films develop a variety of temporal patterns as a way of creating meaning and value in the stories and experiences they recount.

One of the first narrative films, Edwin S. Porter's *The Great Train Robbery* (1903), manipulated time and place by shifting from one action to another and coordinated different spaces by jumping between exterior and interior scenes. Since then, movie narratives have contracted and expanded times and places according to ever-varying patterns and formulas, spanning centuries and traveling the world in *Cloud Atlas* (2012) or confining the tale to two hours in one town in Agnès Varda's *Cléo from 5 to 7* (1962).

Linear Chronology

Most commonly, plots follow a **linear chronology** — the arrangement of plot events and actions that follow each other in time. The logic and direction of the plot commonly follow a central character's motivation — the ideas or emotions that make that person tick. In these cases, a character pursues an object, a belief,

or a goal, and the events in the plot show how that character's motivating desire affects or creates new situations or actions. Past actions generate present situations, and decisions made in the present create future events. The narrative of *Little Miss Sunshine* (2006) has a linear structure. A family of offbeat and dysfunctional characters travels from New Mexico to California to participate in a beauty pageant, and on their drive toward this single goal, over the course of several days, they must overcome many, sometimes hilarious, predicaments, obstacles, and personalities in order to complete their narrative journey and ultimately discover themselves anew. Although journeys are obvious examples of linear plots, many film genres rely on this chronology. In a romantic comedy like *Trainwreck* (2015), the bad behavior of the heroine and the mistrust of her love interest lead to complications and misunderstandings, but these only delay the obvious resolution of the couple getting together **[Figure 7.23]**.

A still from the movie, Trainwreck, shows an over the should shot of a woman talking to a man in front of her

7.23 ***Trainwreck*** (2015). The poor choices of Amy Schumer's character may seem to lead away from the desired goal but ultimately prove that the romantic pair are right for each other.

Linear narratives most commonly structure their stories in terms of beginnings, middles, and ends. As a product of this structure, the relationship between the narrative opening and closing is central to the temporal logic of a plot. How a movie begins and ends and what relationship exists between those two poles explain much about a film. Sometimes this relation can create a sense of closure or completion, as happens when a romance ends with a couple united or with a journey finally concluded. Other plots provide less certain relations between openings and closings. In Ang Lee's *Life of Pi* (2012), Pi Patel's story begins with his childhood in a zoo and a dramatic shipwreck that leaves him drifting the seas in a lifeboat with a zebra, an orangutan, a hyena, and a male Bengal tiger nicknamed Richard Parker. At the conclusion, the reality of what actually happened (and what was fantasy) is brought into question **[Figure 7.24]**.

A still from the movie, Life of Pi, shows the protagonist of standing on his tattered lifeboat with a bewildered expression as he stares into the distance beyond the frame.

7.24 ***Life of Pi*** (2012). In Ang Lee's magical film, the protagonist's fantastic adventure concludes with dramatic ambiguity.

Plot Chronologies: Flashback and Flashforward

How is time shaped in this clip from *Shutter Island* (2010)? What especially important elements of narrative's time scheme can you point to?

A video is pause mode shows a scene from the movie, Shutter Island. It shows the close-up of protagonist Teddy Daniels's face. The background shows branches of trees.

Description

The blurred branches in the background are separated by the close-up on Teddy. The branches on the left appear to be from pine trees and are skewed upward and to the left. The branches on the right have leaves and spots of sky can be seen in gaps between foliage.

Despite the dominance of linear chronologies in movie narratives, many films deviate, to some extent, to create different perspectives on events. Such deviations may lead viewers toward an understanding of what is or is not important in a story or disrupt or challenge notions of the film as a realistic re-creation of events. Plot order describes how events and actions are arranged in relation to each other. Actions may appear out of chronological order, as when a later event precedes an earlier one in the plot.

One of the most common nonlinear plot devices is the narrative **flashback**, whereby a story shifts dramatically to an earlier time in the story. When a flashback describes the whole story, it creates a retrospective plot that tells of past events from the perspective of the present or future. In *The Godfather: Part II* (1974), the modern story of mobster Michael Corleone periodically alternates with the flashback story of his father, Vito, many decades earlier. This comparison of two different histories draws parallels and suggests differences between the father's formation of his Mafia family and the son's later destruction of that family in the name of the Mafia business. Likewise, in Pedro Almodóvar's *Pain and Glory* (2019), a despondent filmmaker experiencing chronic pain relives key

moments of his past. The onset, style, and mood of these encounters parallel the crisis of creativity he is experiencing in the present **[Figures 7.25a and 7.25b]**.

Two stills, (a) and (b) depict scenes from the movie, Pain and Glory.

7.25a and 7.25b ***Pain and Glory*** (2019). The temporal structure of this film about an aging filmmaker's inner life evokes the unbidden nature of memory and the creative process.

Description
Still (a) shows a close up of a man, with his eye closed, underwater in a pool.

Still (b) shows four women washing clothes on the bank of a river, one with a young boy standing behind her.

Conversely but less frequently, a film may employ a narrative **flashforward**, leaping ahead of the normal cause-and-effect order to a future incident. A film narrative may show a man in an office and then flash forward to his plane leaving an airport before returning to the moment in the plot when he sits at his desk. In *They Shoot Horses, Don't They?* (1969), the plot flashes forward to a time when Robert, an unsuccessful Hollywood director during the Great Depression, is on trial. The unexplained scene creates a mysterious suspense that is not resolved until much later in the film.

Other nonlinear chronological orders might interweave past, present, and future events in less predictable or logical patterns. In *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* (2004), the two main characters, Joel and Clementine, struggle to resurrect a romantic past that has been intentionally erased from their memories. The flashbacks here appear not as natural remembrances but as dramatic struggles to re-create a part of the personal narrative they have lost **[Figure 7.26]**. *Hiroshima mon amour* (1959) mixes documentary photos of the nuclear destruction of Hiroshima at the end of World War II, a modern story of a love affair between a French actress and a

Japanese architect, and flashback images of the woman growing up in France during the war, when she had a relationship with a German soldier **[Figure 7.27]**. Gradually, and not in chronological order, the story of her past is revealed. Conversations with her lover and images of Japan during World War II seem to provoke leaps in her memory. As the film narrative follows these flashbacks, we become involved in the difficulty of memory as it attempts to reconstruct an identity across a historical trauma. When a narrative violates linear chronology in these ways, the film may be demonstrating how subjective memories interact with the real world. At other times, as with *Hiroshima mon amour*, these violations may be ways of questioning the very notion of linear progress in life and civilization.

A still from the movie, Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind, shows Joel Barish and Clementine Kruczynski lying next to each other on ice.

7.26 ***Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*** (2004). The film's chronology attempts to recover what has been lost from the couple's story.

A still from the movie, Hiroshima mon amour, shows an anxious young woman looking at herself in the bathroom mirror.

7.27 ***Hiroshima mon amour*** (1959). The nonlinear mix of past and present engages us in the main character's attempt to reconstruct an identity across a historical trauma.

Description
Hiroshima mon amour (1959). The nonlinear mix of past and present engages

us in the main character's attempt to reconstruct an identity across a historical trauma.

The Deadline Structure

One of the most common temporal schemes in narrative films is the **deadline structure** — a narrative structured around a central event or action that must be accomplished by a certain time. This structure adds to the tension and excitement of a plot by accelerating the action toward that certain moment, hour, day, or year. These narrative rhythms can create suspense and anticipation that define the entire narrative and the characters who motivate it. In *The Graduate* (1967), Benjamin must race to the church in time to declare his love for Elaine and stop her from marrying his rival. In the German film *Run Lola Run* (1998), Lola has twenty minutes to find 100,000 deutsche marks to save her boyfriend. This tight deadline results in three different versions of the same race across town in which, like a game, Lola's rapid-fire choices result in three different conclusions **[Figure 7.28]**. In another variation on the deadline structure, high school graduation signifies incipient adulthood in countless youth comedies. In *Booksmart* (2019), for

example, two A students seek to have four years of fun in one night [Figure 7.29].

A still from the movie, Run Lola Run, shows the protagonist of the movie running on a sidewalk toward the viewer.

7.28 ***Run Lola Run*** (1998). In three different versions of the same race against time, Lola is forced to make different choices.

A still from the movie, Booksmart, shows two teenaged girls standing in the doorway of a room in their school.

7.29 ***Booksmart*** (2019). A common high school graduation “deadline” plot is revitalized in this film, featuring female protagonists who are academically serious and mutually supportive.

Description
A poster on the door has an image of chicks with graduation caps and text that reads, “Too cool to stay in school?”

Parallel Plots

The deadline structure points to another common temporal pattern in film narrative — the doubled or parallel plotline. In parallel plots, there is an implied simultaneity of or connection between two different plotlines, usually with their intersection at one or more points. Many movies alternate between actions or subplots that take place at roughly the same time and that may be bound together in some way, such as by the relationship of two or more characters. One standard formula in a parallel plot is to intertwine a private story with a public story. *Jerry Maguire* (1996) develops the story of Jerry’s efforts to succeed as an agent in the cutthroat world of professional sports, and concurrently it follows the ups and downs of his romance with Dorothy, a single mother, and his bond with her son, Ray. In some crime or caper films, such as *Ocean’s Eleven* (2001), a murder or heist plot (in this case, involving a complicated casino robbery) parallels and entwines with an equally complicated love story (here between Danny and Tess Ocean). In addition to recognizing parallel plots, we need to consider the relationship between them.

Narrative Duration and Frequency

Movie narratives also rely on temporal patterns through which events in a story are constructed according to different time schemes. Not surprisingly, these narrative temporalities overlap with and rely on similar temporal patterns developed as editing strategies. **Narrative duration** refers to the length of time used to present an event or action in a plot. *Die Hard: With a Vengeance* (1995) features a now-standard digital countdown on a bomb that threatens to blow up New York City. The narrative suspense is, in large part, due to the amount of time the plot spends on this scene, dwelling on the bomb mechanism. The drawn-out time devoted to defusing the bomb, much longer than thirty real seconds, shows how the temporal duration can represent an extended psychological time.

At the other end of the spectrum, a plot may include only a temporal flash of an action that really endures for a much longer period. In *Secretariat* (2010), a rapid montage of images condenses many months of victories during which the renowned racehorse of the title rises to fame. Instead of representing the many details that extend an actual duration of one or more events, the plot condenses these actions into a much shorter temporal sequence. Both examples call attention to the difference between story time and plot time. Story events that take years — such as a character growing up — may be condensed into a brief montage in a film's plot.

In a linear plot, each event occurs once. But **narrative frequency** — the number of times a plot element is repeated throughout a narrative — can be manipulated as an important storytelling tool. For example, in the narrative of an investigation, a crime may be depicted many times as more pieces of the story are put together. In *The Handmaiden* (2016), events are depicted from the perspective of the two female protagonists in turn, revealing significant narrative information **[Figures 7.30a and 7.30b]**.

Two stills, (a) and (b), depict scenes from the movie, The Handmaiden.

7.30a and 7.30b *The Handmaiden* (2016). A scene that the handmaiden Sook-hee witnesses from outside the window in the film's first part **(a)** is repeated indoors as the narration shifts

to her mistress Hideko's story **(b)**. The viewer struggles to follow a twisting plot full of characters who are not what they appear to be.

Description
Still (a) shows a man and a woman sitting in chairs in front of a hearth. The man sips from a teacup and the woman plays with her hair.

Still (b) shows a man and a woman sitting in chairs looking at each other while another woman observes them through glass windows in the background.

Narrative Space

Along with narrative patterns of time, plot constructions also involve a variety of spatial schemes through the course of the narrative. These narrative locations — indoors, outdoors, natural spaces, artificial spaces, outer space — define more than just the background for stories. Stories and their characters explore these spaces, contrast them, conquer them, inhabit them, leave them, build on them, and transform them. As a consequence, both the characters and the stories usually change and develop not only as part of the formal shape of these places but also as part of their cultural and social significance and connotations. Michael Haneke's *Amour* (2012) takes place almost exclusively in the apartment where a couple in their eighties have spent their married life **[Figure 7.31]**. After Anne suffers a stroke, the drama of this single mise-en-scène generates layers and layers of shared emotions and memories as the

husband and wife struggle with the climactic crisis they now face. In contrast, the complex temporality of *Interstellar*'s (2014) science fiction plot — involving wormholes and characters traveling in space who age at different rates than people on earth — is stabilized to some extent by its narrative spaces, which depict vivid planetary environments. A fundamental narrative of betrayal is set on a frozen planet with a toxic atmosphere.

A still from the movie, Amour, shows an aged couple at their dining table with only two chairs in their kitchen.

7.31 ***Amour*** (2012). The film takes place in an apartment where the confined space intensifies the residents' memories, experiences, emotions, and decisions.

In conjunction with narrative action and characters, the cultural and social resonances of narrative spaces may be developed in four different ways — historically, ideologically, psychologically, and symbolically. Whether actual or constructed, the *historical location* — the recognized marker of a historical setting that can carry meanings and connotations important to the narrative — abounds in film narratives. For example, in *Roman Holiday* (1953), a character visits the monuments of Rome, where she discovers a sense of human history and a romantic glory missing from her own life **[Figure 7.32]**. Films from *Ben-Hur* (1925) to *Gladiator* (2000) use the historical connotations of Rome to infuse the narrative with grandeur and wonder.

A still from the movie, Roman Holiday, shows a man walking down the Spanish steps toward a woman eating an ice-cream cone.

7.32 ***Roman Holiday*** (1953). During a character's exploration of Rome, a sense of human history emerges.

An *ideological location* is a space or place inscribed with distinctive social values or ideologies in a narrative. Sometimes these narrative spaces have unmistakable political or philosophical significance, such as Folsom State Prison, where Johnny Cash bonds with prisoners in *Walk the Line* (2005), or the oppressive grandeur of the czar's palace in Eisenstein's *October* (1927). The politics of gender also can underpin the locations of a film narrative in crucial ideological ways. In *9 to 5* (1980), the plot focuses on the ways that three working women transform the patriarchal office space of their jobs into a place where the needs of women are met **[Figure 7.33]**.

A still from the movie, 9 to 5, shows three women in an office room, chatting and laughing over drinks.

7.33 ***9 to 5*** (1980). Three women transform the gendered politics of office space.

Psychological location in a film narrative suggests an important correlation between a character's state of mind and the physical place he or she inhabits in the story. In Sofia Coppola's *Lost in Translation* (2003), an American actor (played by Bill Murray) experiences confusion and communication difficulties while visiting contemporary Tokyo. These, along with his isolation in an expensive hotel, connect to deeper feelings of disaffection and disillusionment with his life back home **[Figure 7.34]**. Less common, **symbolic space** is a space transformed through spiritual or other abstract means related to the narrative. In different versions of the Robinson Crusoe story — from Luis Buñuel's *The Adventures of Robinson Crusoe* (1954) to *Robinson Crusoe on Mars* (1964) and *Cast Away* (2000) — the space of an island might become emblematic of the providential ways of life or of the absurdity of the human condition **[Figure 7.35]**.

A still from the movie, Lost in Translation, shows a man sitting alone at a bar with his head hung. A glass of liquor sits on the bar before him and he holds a lit cigar in his lips.

7.34 ***Lost in Translation*** (2003). The isolation of an American actor in Tokyo suggests a disaffected psychological space.

A still from the movie, Cast Away, shows a man sitting on a log by a fire near an island coast.

7.35 ***Cast Away*** (2000). The island as symbolic space becomes emblematic of the absurdity of the human condition.

Description
The man's hair is long and wild and he's nearly nude but for the cloth around his waist. A soccer ball with grass attached as hair sits on a nearby tree stump.

Complex narratives often develop and transform the significance of one or more locations, making this transformation of specific places central to the meaning of the movie. In Martin Scorsese's *Gangs of New York* (2002), the Five Points neighborhood of New York City in 1863 becomes a site of historical realism as an infamous gangland territory, a psychological place of terror and violence, the ideological location of emerging American social classes, and a symbol of American culture. In Jim Jarmusch's three-part film *Mystery Train* (1989), the narrative interweaves the stories of two Japanese tourists, an Italian woman on her way home to bury her husband, and three drifters who hold up a liquor store **[Figure 7.36]**. All happen to seek refuge in a run-down Memphis hotel. Although they never meet, they infuse the narrative location of the hotel with the meanings of their individual dramas. For the Japanese couple, the hotel becomes a place of historical nostalgia for 1950s America and blues music; for the Italian woman, a comically ritualistic and spiritual location where she eventually meets Elvis Presley's ghost; and for the three drifters, a weird debating hall where they discuss contemporary social violence.

A still from the movie, Mystery Train, shows two Japanese tourists talking to a hotel receptionist.

7.36 ***Mystery Train*** (1989). Japanese tourists, the ghost of Elvis, and bungling drifters transform the space of a run-down Memphis hotel into an offbeat carnival of loss and desire.

Narrative Perspectives

From what point of view is the narration of this clip from *The Royal Tenenbaums* (2001)? If not controlled by an individual, how might the narration reveal certain attitudes about the story's logic?

A screenshot of a paused video shows a scene from the movie, Royal Tenenbaums.

Description

The scene shows a woman talking on a phone call and a young boy wearing a sweatband sits on woman's lap with elbows resting on an open book while staring beyond the frame. A young girl, seated on the left, reads a book. A play button is present at the center of the screenshot.

Plots are organized by the perspectives that inform them. Whether this perspective is explicit or implicit, we refer to this dimension of narrative as **narration** — the telling of a story or description of a situation. It is the emotional, physical, or intellectual perspective through which the characters, events, and action of the plot are conveyed. It shapes how plot materials appear and what is or is not revealed about them. Narration carries and creates attitudes, values, and aims that are central to understanding any movie. A **narrator** is a character or other person whose voice and perspective describe the action of a film, either in voiceover or through a particular point of view. It may be clearly designated in a film by direct address to the viewer. However, the term *narration* is not restricted to a single character or to verbalization within a movie about the plot but also can refer to how movies organize plot elements. The most common narrative perspectives are first-person, omniscient, and restricted. One tactic for drawing us into a story is a narrative frame. Frames and other devices direct the arrangement of the plot and indicate certain cultural, social, or psychological perspectives on the events of the story.

First-Person Narrative and Narrative Frames

Signaled by the pronoun *I* in written or spoken texts, a **first-person narration** in film may be attributed to a single character using voiceover commentary or to camera techniques and optical effects that mark an individual's perspective. However, movie images can usually only approximate a subjective point of view, in which the film frame re-creates what a single character sees, for a limited period without appearing contrived. *Lady in the Lake* (1947), filmed from the point of view of detective Philip Marlowe, is a famous instance of cinematic first person and is considered by many to be a failed experiment. Video games and virtual reality have greatly extended the immersive capacity of first-person perspective (see Technology in Action: Immersive Film Narrative).

TECHNOLOGY IN ACTION

Immersive Film Narrative

Cinema's distinction as a narrative medium lies in its immersive potential. Across film history, technologies have been developed to stimulate viewers' senses and to give them the illusion of direct participation in the film's world. The introduction of synchronized sound in the late 1920s was a major step in this direction; the perfection of color processes was another. But new technologies also have the potential to draw too much attention to themselves, thus disrupting the experience for viewers and distracting from a film's narrative.

3-D technology was developed in the 1950s to emulate human stereoscopic vision, filming with two cameras or lenses to mimic what is seen by both the right and left eyes and combining both images in projection. Audiences wore special glasses that created a tangible experience of dimensional space. In *House of Wax* (1953), the first major studio release in the format, 3-D technology worked with color and directional sound to deliver a memorable horror film experience **[Figure 7.37a]**. But the *New York Times* dismissed its "cheap and obvious" story as "a bundle of horrifying claptrap."

A still from the movie, House of Wax, shows a man with extensive scarring on his facial features threatening a woman.

7.37a ***House of Wax*** (1953). This thriller combined 3-D technology with color and stereophonic sound to create a new type of immersive experience.

In the 1990s, computer-generated imagery (CGI), whether of entire environments like the *Toy Story* franchise (1995–2019) or special effects sequences as in *Twister* (1995), sparked wonder in audiences, involving them viscerally in film narrative. Perhaps the most ambitious attempt to combine CGI technology with an engrossing narrative was the science fiction epic *Avatar* (2009), set in the richly imagined, lush environment of the moon Pandora. Director James Cameron claimed he waited to make the film until technology could fully support his vision for it. Sophisticated camera systems, which Cameron helped develop, enabled him to direct actors on a motion-capture stage as he viewed them in CGI environments. The finished film integrates actors' performances with a fully realized fictional world that audiences experienced with sensory immediacy **[Figure 7.37b]**. Some viewers reportedly became so engrossed in the world of Pandora that they experienced depression after leaving the theater. *Avatar*'s success reinvigorated 3-D technology, sparking upgrades in theaters all over the world.

A still from the movie, Avatar, shows a close up of a blue man, with a flat nose and extensive face paint, drawing an arrow with a bow.

7.37b ***Avatar*** (2009). This science fiction 3-D epic entranced audiences with its lush digital environments and influenced the worldwide conversion to digital projection.

Other modern films take less computer-reliant approaches to audience immersion. Emmanuel Luzbecki's virtuosic cinematography in *The Revenant* (2015) inextricably places the viewer in the harsh frontier environment of 1823 **[Figure 7.37c]**. As the beleaguered protagonist faces the elements and his enemies — and does battle with a bear — the viewer suffers with him. With minimal use of CGI (the bear isn't real, but almost all other story elements are), the film was shot in sequence using only natural light in cold and forbidding conditions. *The Revenant* takes a different path to immersive storytelling than *Avatar* but is no less successful.

A still from the movie, The Revenant, shows two men wading through water in dark woods.

7.37c *The Revenant* (2015). Director Alejandro González Iñárritu sought authenticity in shooting this award-winning film in sequence and using only natural light.

Appearing at the beginning and end of a film, a **narrative frame** designates a context or person positioned outside the principal narrative of a film, such as bracketing scenes in which a character in the story's present begins to relate events of the past and later concludes her or his tale. This kind of narrative frame can help define a film's terms and meaning. Sometimes signaled by a voiceover, this frame may indicate the story's audience, the social context, or the period from which the story is understood. The frame may, for instance, indicate that the story is a tale for children, as in *The Blue Bird* (1940); that it is being told to a detective in a police station, as in *The Usual Suspects* (1995); or that it is the memory of an elderly woman, as in *Titanic* (1997). In each case, the film's frame indicates the crucial perspective and logic that define the narration.

In *Sunset Boulevard* (1950), the presence of the narrator is announced through the voiceover of the screenwriter-protagonist who introduces the setting and circumstances of the story. His voice and death become the frame for the story. Throughout the course of the film, his voiceover disappears and reappears, but we are aware from the start that the story is a product of his perspective.

Ang Lee's *The Ice Storm* (1997) also uses a narrative frame. In this case, the perspective of the frame is that of a young man whose commuter train has stopped en route to his home because of a

heavy ice storm **[Figure 7.38]**. The film begins as he waits in the night for the tracks to be cleared of ice and debris and reflects on his family. This isolated moment and compartment frame the flashback that follows. Although he, too, disappears as a narrator until we return to the train and his voice at the end of the movie, his role makes clear that this tale of a dysfunctional family in the 1970s is about this young man at a turning point in his life. Indeed, both these examples suggest a question to ask about narrators: does it make a difference if they are seen as part of the story?

A still from the movie, The Ice Storm, shows a young man huddled in his train seat.

7.38 ***The Ice Storm*** (1997). When a storm stops his train, a young man's thoughts on his past become the film's narrative frame.

Third-Person Narrative: Omniscient and Restricted

The perspective of a film may adopt **third-person narration** — a narration that assumes an objective and detached stance toward the plot and characters by describing events from outside the story. With third-person narratives like *Gravity* (2013), it still may be possible to describe a specific kind of attitude or point of view. Far from being staid and detached, the organizing perspective of this film is forceful and dynamic, with camera movements that observe the main character's plight **[Figure 7.39]**.

7.39 ***Gravity*** (2013). Although third-person narratives maintain objectivity, they also can create dynamic characters and action.

The standard form of classical movies is **omniscient narration** — narration that presents all elements of the plot, exceeding the perspective of any one character (a version of third-person

narration). All elements of the plot are presented from many or all potential angles. An omniscient perspective knows all, knows what is important, and knows how to arrange events to reveal the truth about a life or a history. Although the four films in the *Bourne* series (2002–2016) employ omniscient perspectives that follow Jason Bourne's flight through multiple cities around the world, the story itself contrasts the attempt of a covert American agency's surveillance mechanism to approximate that omniscient perspective in its pursuit of Bourne, while he constantly attempts to escape it.

A limited third-person perspective, or **restricted narration** — a narrative in which our knowledge is limited to that of a particular character — organizes stories by focusing on one or two characters. Even though this perspective on a story also assumes objectivity and is able to present events and characters outside the range of those primary characters, it confines itself largely to the experiences and thoughts of the major characters.

The historical source of restricted narration is the novel and short story. Its emphasis on one or two individuals reflects a relatively modern view of the world that is concerned mostly with the progress of individuals. Limiting the narration in this way allows the movie to attend to large historical events and actions (battles or family meetings, for instance) while also prioritizing the main character's problems and desires. Buster Keaton's *The General* (1927), set in Georgia and Tennessee during the Civil War, follows this

pattern. Johnny Gray's ingenuity becomes apparent and seems much more honorable, and funny, than the grand epic of war that stays in the background of the narrative. The unusual premise of *Jojo Rabbit* (2019) is a young German boy's imaginary friendship with Adolph Hitler, a narrative point of view that the film manipulates through absurdist comedy as the child's perspective on oppression widens **[Figure 7.40]**. With these and other restricted narratives, some characters receive more or less attention from the limited narrative point of view.

7.40 ***Jojo Rabbit*** (2019). Restricted to a child's point of view, this film takes on hateful ideology through satire.

Reflexive, Unreliable, and Multiple Narration

Omniscient narration and restricted narration are the most common kinds of classical narration, but some films use variations on these models. **Reflexive narration** is a mode of narration that calls attention to the narrative point of view of the story in order to complicate or subvert the movie's narrative authority as an objective perspective on the world. Robert Wiene's *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1920) is a well-known early example of reflexive narration that fractures the veracity and reliability of its point of view when, at the film's conclusion, we discover that the narrator is a madman. In *About a Boy* (2002), the main character often comments reflexively on his own behavior as he pretends to be a father in order to meet women.

Contemporary and experimental films commonly question the very process of narration at the same time that they construct the narrative. **Unreliable narration** is a type of narration that raises questions about the truth of the story being told (it is sometimes called *manipulative narration*). In *Fight Club* (1999), the bottom falls out of the narration when, toward the conclusion of the film, it becomes clear that the first-person narrator has been hallucinating the entire existence of a central character around whom the plot develops **[Figure 7.41]**.

7.41 ***Fight Club*** (1999). This is a dramatic example of a film whose narration suddenly appears to be the questionable fantasy of the film's narrator.

Multiple narrations are found in films that use several different narrative perspectives for a single story or for different stories in a movie that loosely fits these perspectives together. D. W. Griffith's 1916 movie *Intolerance* famously links four stories about prejudice and hate from different historical periods ("the modern story," "the Judean story," "the French story," and "the Babylonian story"), a precursor to the tradition of multiple narration. Woody Allen's comedy *Zelig* (1983) parodies the objectivity proposed by many narratives by presenting the life of Leonard Zelig in the 1920s and 1930s through the onscreen narrations of numerous fictional and real persons (such as Saul Bellow and Susan Sontag). Contemporary films like *Crash* (2004) and *Babel* (2006) weave together different stories from around a city or even the world, coincidentally linked by major events in the characters' lives **[Figure 7.42]**.

7.42 ***Babel*** (2006). Overlapping multiple narratives are woven together in a film about the search for a common humanity.

VIEWING CUE

What narrative perspective features most prominently in the film you just viewed? If the narration is omniscient or restricted, how does it determine the meaning of the story?

Anthology films are composed of various segments, often by different filmmakers — such as *Germany in Autumn* (1978), *Two Evil Eyes* (1990), *Four Rooms* (1995), and *Paris, je t'aime* (2006). They are more extreme versions of multiple narratives. Although the stories may share a common theme or issue — a political crisis in Germany, adaptations of Edgar Allan Poe stories, or zany guests staying in a

decaying hotel — they intentionally replace a singular narrative perspective with smaller narratives that establish their own distinctive perspectives. In the case of the film celebrating the seventieth anniversary of the People's Republic of China, *My Country, My People* (2019), seven stories by seven directors — each set in a different decade — reflect the film's theme of individual connection to a larger whole in form as well as content.

FILM IN FOCUS Narration and Gender in *Gone Girl* (2014)

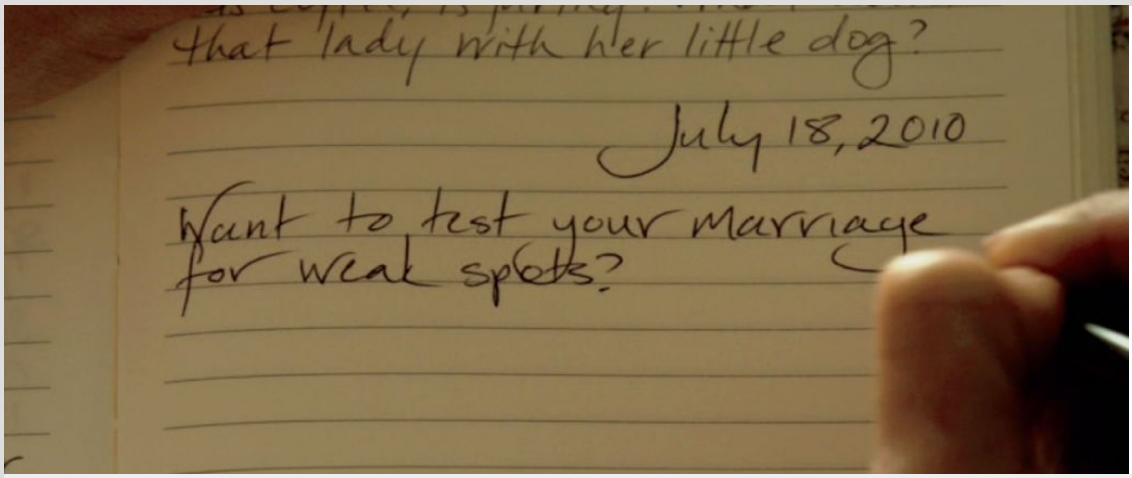
See also: *Double Indemnity* (1944); *Fight Club* (1999)

To watch a clip from *Gone Girl* (2014), go to LaunchPad for the *Film Experience* at **launchpadworks.com**

Adapted by novelist Gillian Flynn from her bestselling thriller of the same name, *Gone Girl* (2014) follows attractive, affable Nick Dunne (Ben Affleck) as he discovers his beautiful wife's disappearance on their fifth wedding anniversary and falls under suspicion as her murderer. As nondiegetic captions mark the time that has elapsed since Amy (Rosamund Pike) went missing, the investigation alternates between the progress of the detective on the case and Nick's increasingly suspicious movements. Both narrative threads are interwoven with flashbacks of events leading up to the day of Amy's disappearance: although the plot covers less than three months, the story covers more than five years. The viewer is given a range of narrative perspectives and caught up in a series of narrative snares: What

happened on July 5? What went wrong in this seemingly perfect marriage? And crucially, whose version of events is to be believed?

Nick's behavior is gradually accounted for in a series of conversations with his sympathetic twin sister, and Amy's perspective is supplied through her first-person narration of the flashbacks. At first, we see Amy writing in her diary as we hear her voice on the soundtrack **[Figure 7.43]** relating happy memories of meeting and courting Nick. However, soon the diary-writing frame gives way to her restricted narration of scenes from the marriage that are less rosy. Her voiceover takes on added poignancy because she is, precisely, *gone*: "I feel like I could disappear," she narrates, recounting her life after moving with Nick to small-town Missouri.



7.43 ***Gone Girl*** (2014). Amy's narration starts with her diary entries.

The puzzle-like quality of the film's storytelling is emphasized by a puzzle within the story. Amy has traditionally led Nick on an annual scavenger hunt for his anniversary present, and in the movie's present-day timeline, the clues she has left behind take on a sinister cast as they double as clues to her own fate. Through her voice delivering clues, Amy remains a present absence as concerns over her whereabouts escalate into a national media event. The relationship between fact and fiction (in the sense both of falsehood and of storytelling) is a ubiquitous theme of *Gone Girl*. As the detective cautiously proceeds to formulate her own version of events, a television news personality leads the rush to judgment

regarding Nick's guilt. The distortions of the news media are prefigured in an early flashback in which Nick proposes to Amy while posing as a reporter. This scene of media manipulation cuts to a thematically linked present-day press conference called around Amy's disappearance. Orchestrated by her parents, the press conference reminds us that Amy grew up in the shadow of "Amazing Amy," the heroine of a series of children's books in which her mother embellished her own daughter's character.

The fact that these three jugglers of fact and fiction — author, detective, and news anchor — are women underscore the story's primary concern with gender roles in narrative, especially the conventions that assign men the role of hero and women the role of victim or reward. Amy's life narrative is already scripted for her, and she does not find life as a stay-at-home wife to be all that "amazing." In the noir-like tale of crime and deceit that she constructs instead, Amy plays the role of femme fatale, whose alluring appearance hides pathology and danger. But she is also the narrator, a role usually preserved for the male investigator. If she is an unreliable narrator, it is because her outward perfection is spectacularly deceptive and the story of her agency is also one of her victimization.

At the midpoint of the film, we are led, in the words of Nick's lawyer, to "realign our view of Amy." Over a black screen, Amy states, in a line that reveals some but not all of the film's twists: "I am so much happier now that I'm dead." The plot thickens as the details of her getaway are filled in and cross-cut with the ongoing search **[Figure 7.44]**. The movie, like the book on which it is based, turns on tricks of narration and on our assumptions about narrative progression and gender roles. But unlike the book, which is written in alternating first-person narration from Nick's and Amy's separate perspectives in "he said, she said" fashion, the film uses a wealth of sensory information, both images and sounds, to direct and deflect our narrative comprehension. The camera is not obtrusively subjective, the score by Trent Rezor and Atticus Ross is unsettled and ominous, and the editing confuses spatial and temporal and thus cause-and-effect relations. But narration through images rather than language introduces a specific history of gendered relations of power in looking that privileges the male point of view.

7.44 ***Gone Girl*** (2014). Amy's narration catches up with her present whereabouts.

A trace of Nick's first-person perspective, given weight within the film's opening credits sequence, links the film's narrative enigmas to desire and violence embedded in the gaze. "When I think of my wife," a male voice confides over the black screen, "I always think of her head." The back of a woman's head resting on a pillow **[Figure 7.45a]** recalls Hitchcock's many elusive blonde heroines, as the voice continues: "I imagine cracking opening her lovely skull, unspooling her brains, trying to get answers," and the woman turns to meet our gaze **[Figure 7.45b]**. The virtuosic filmmaking of David Fincher, whose *Fight Club* (1999) uses unreliable narration similarly in a male-centered narrative puzzle of murderous rivalry, unspools images and sounds that complicate Gillian Flynn's language with another perspective.

(a)

(b)

7.45 ***Gone Girl*** (2014). The male voiceover opens the film by casting doubt on the female image.

Description

Still (a) shows a hand caressing a woman's head resting on a pillow.

Still (b) shows the woman turning and looking up at the man stroking her head.

Thinking about Film Narrative

From historical dramas like *Dunkirk* (2017) to the less plot-driven story of teenage life on the run in *American Honey* (2016), movies have been prized as both public and private histories — as records of celebrated events, personal memories, and daily routines. Film narratives both shape the temporal experiences of individuals and reflect and reveal the patterns of larger social histories of nations, communities, and cultures.

Film narratives never function independently of historical, cultural, and industrial issues. Many narratives in Western cultures turn inward, centering on individuals, their fates, and their self-knowledge. Historically, individual heroes are predominantly male, with female characters participating in their quest or growth primarily through marriage, which functions as a pervasive form of narrative resolution. Moreover, Western narrative models, such as the Judeo-Christian one that assumes a progressive movement from a fall to redemption, reflect a basic cultural belief in individual and social development.

Certainly, cultural alternatives to this popular logic of progression and forward movement exist, and in some cultures, individual characters may be less central to the story than the give-and-take movements of the community or the passing of the seasons. In *Xala*

(1975), for instance, by Senegalese filmmaker Ousmane Sembène, the narrative is influenced by oral tradition, and the central character's plight — he has been placed under a curse of impotence — is linked to a whole community. This tradition is associated with the griot, the storyteller in some West African cultures who recounts at public gatherings the many tales that bind the community together.

Shaping Memory, Making History

Film narratives shape memory by describing individual temporal experiences. In other words, they commonly portray the changes in a day, a year, or the life of a character or community. These narratives are not necessarily actual real-time experiences, as is partly the case in the single-shot film *Russian Ark* (2002). However, they do aim to approximate the patterns through which different individuals experience and shape time — time as endurance, time as growth, time as loss. In *Lee Daniels' The Butler* (2013), the narrative describes the life of Cecil Gaines, the butler for eight U.S. presidents, and intertwines his personal struggles and achievements as a White House servant and the major historical events surrounding him, such as the civil rights movement and the Vietnam War. The often strained interactions between his personal experiences and public events celebrate how individual memory participates in the shape of history. In the virtually dialogue-free Italian film *Le Quattro Volte*

(*The Four Times*) (2010), time is refracted in four episodes showing interrelated cycles of human, plant, and animal life [Figure 7.46].

7.46 ***Le Quattro Volte (The Four Times)*** (2010). One narrative told in this contemplative and often funny film is shaped by the observations of a baby goat.

Through their reflections on and revelations of social history, film narratives also make history. Narratives order the various dimensions of time — past, present, and future events — in ways that are similar to models of history used by nations or other communities. Consequently, narratives create public perceptions of and ways of understanding those histories. The extent to which narratives and public histories are bound together can be seen by noting how many historical events — such as the U.S. civil rights movement or the first landing on the moon — become the subject for narrative films. But narrative films also can reveal public history

in smaller events, where personal crisis or success becomes representative of a larger national or world history. The tale of a heroic African American Union army regiment, *Glory* (1989) **[Figure 7.47]** tells a history of the Civil War left out of narratives like *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) and *Gone with the Wind* (1939). By concentrating on the personal life of Mark Zuckerberg during his college years, *The Social Network* (2010) also reveals key dimensions of the social networking site Facebook and the cultural history of the social media revolution **[Figure 7.48]**. In these cases, film narratives are about cultural origins, historical losses, and national myths.

7.47 *Glory* (1989) A narrative of the heroic African American Union army regiment that fought during the Civil War tells a different history of that war.

7.48 ***The Social Network*** (2010). Here the personal history of the founder of Facebook reflects a much broader transformation in the social history of technology.

Narrative Traditions

Based on how movies can both shape memory and make history, two prominent styles of film narrative have emerged. The classical film narrative usually presents a close relationship between individual lives and social history, whereas the alternative film narrative often dramatizes the disjunction between how individuals live their lives according to personal temporal patterns and how those patterns conflict with those of the social history that intersects with their lives.

Classical Film Narrative

Three primary features characterize the classical film narrative:

- It centers on one or more central characters who propel the plot with a cause-and-effect logic, whereby an action generates a reaction.
- Its plots develop with linear chronologies directed at certain goals, even when flashbacks are integrated into that linearity.
- It employs an omniscient or a restricted narration that suggests some degree of realism.

For the film you will watch next in class, what type of history is being depicted? What does the narrative say about the meaning of time and change in the lives of the characters? What events are presented as most important, and why?

Classical narrative often appears as a three-part structure in which a situation or circumstance is presented; the situation is disrupted, often with a crisis or confrontation; and the disruption is resolved. Its narrative point of view is usually objective and realistic, including most information necessary to understand the characters and their world.

Dominating from the end of the 1910s to the end of the studio system in the 1950s, the **classical Hollywood narrative** still influences mainstream storytelling. But there have been many historical and cultural variations on this narrative model. Both the 1925 and 1959 films of *Ben-Hur* develop their plots around the heroic motivations of the title character and follow his struggles and

triumphs as a former citizen who becomes a slave, rebel, and gladiator, fighting against the cruelties of the Roman empire. Both movies spent great amounts of money on large casts of characters and on details and locations that attempt to seem as realistic as possible. Yet even if both these Hollywood films can be classified as classical narratives, they also can be distinguished by their variations on this narrative formula. Besides some differences in the details of the story, the first version attends more to grand spectacles (such as sea battles) and places greater emphasis on the plight of the Jews as a social group. The second version concentrates significantly more on the individual drama of Charlton Heston as Ben-Hur, on his search to find his lost family, and on Christian salvation through personal faith **[Figure 7.49]**.

7.49 ***Ben-Hur*** (1959). As the different versions of this film demonstrate, classical Hollywood narrative can vary significantly through history — even when the story is fundamentally the same.

VIEWING CUE

View the clip of the opening of *Midnight Cowboy* (1969), and consider how it refers to the classical narrative tradition. What features signal that this film is a postclassical narrative?

Description
The scene shows the protagonist two men in a conversation as they walk along a city sidewalk. A play button is present at the center of the screenshot.

An important variation on the classical narrative tradition is the **postclassical narrative** — the form and content of films after the decline of the Hollywood studio system around 1960, including formerly taboo subject matter and narratives and formal techniques influenced by European cinema. This global body of films began to appear in the decades after World War II and remains visible to the present day. The postclassical model frequently undermines the power of a protagonist to control and drive the narrative forward in

a clear direction. As a postclassical narrative, Martin Scorsese's *Taxi Driver* (1976) works with a plot much like that of *The Searchers* (1956), in which an alienated and troubled Civil War veteran searches the frontier for a lost girl, but in Travis Bickle's strange quest to rescue a New York City prostitute from her pimp, he wanders with even less direction, identity, and control than his predecessor, Ethan. Bickle, a dark hero, becomes lost in his own fantasies **[Figure 7.50]**.

7.50 ***Taxi Driver*** (1976). Robert De Niro's character erupts into senseless violence and seems bent on his own destruction, significantly challenging classical narrative codes.

Alternative Film Narrative

Foreign-language and independent films may reveal information or perspectives traditionally excluded from classical narratives in order

to unsettle audience expectations, provoke new thinking, or differentiate themselves from more common narrative structures. Generally, the **alternative film narrative** deviates from or challenges the linearity of classical film narrative, often undermining the centrality of the main character, the continuity of the plot, or the verisimilitude of the narration.

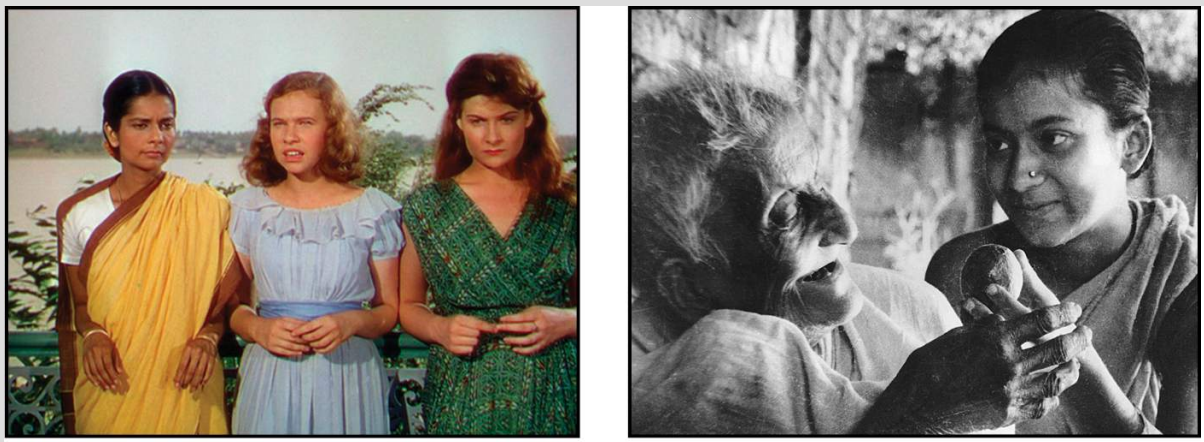
Both the predominance and motivational control of characters in moving a plot come into question with alternative films. Instead of the one or two central characters we see in classical narratives, alternative films may put a multitude of characters into play, and their stories may not even be connected. In Jean-Luc Godard's *La Chinoise* (1967), the narrative shifts among three young people — a student, an economist, a philosopher — whose tales appear like a series of debates about politics and revolution in the streets of Paris.

A visually stunning film from Iran, Abbas Kiarostami's *Taste of Cherry* (1997) contains only the shadow of a story and plot: the middle-aged Mr. Badii wishes to commit suicide for no clear reason. After witnessing a series of random encounters and requests, we remain uncertain about his fate at the conclusion. Freed of the determining motivations of classical characters, the plots of alternative film narratives tend to break apart, omit links in a cause-and-effect logic, or proliferate plotlines well beyond the classical parallel plot.

Many alternative film narratives question, in various ways, the classical narrative assumptions about an objective narrative point of view and about the power of a narrative to reflect universally true experiences. In *Rashomon* (1950), four people, including the ghost of a dead man, recount a tale of robbery, murder, and rape in four different ways, as four different narratives **[Figure 7.51]**. Ultimately, the group that hears these tales (as the frame of the narrative) realizes that it is impossible to know the true story.

7.51 ***Rashomon*** (1950). Four different narrative perspectives tell a grisly tale that brings into question the possibility of narrative objectivity, especially when recounted by people deeply, and differently, affected by events.

Other narratives swerve from classical Western narratives by drawing on indigenous forms of storytelling with culturally distinctive themes, characters, plots, and narrative points of view. Indian filmmaker Satyajit Ray, for example, adapts a famous work of Bengali fiction for his 1955 *Pather Panchali* and its sequels, *Aparajito* (1956) and *The World of Apu* (1959), to render the story of Apu and his impoverished family as he grows from child to adult. Although Ray was influenced by European filmmakers — he served as assistant to Jean Renoir on *The River* (1951), filmed in India — his work is suffused with the symbols and slow-paced plot of the original novel and of village life, as it rediscovers Indian history from inside India **[Figures 7.52a and 7.52b]**.



(a) (b)

7.52 ***Alternative film narratives.*** **(a)** Jean Renoir's *The River* (1951) influenced the work of Satyajit Ray, but **(b)** Ray's *Pather Panchali* (1955), an adaptation of a famous Bengali novel, is suffused with the symbols and slow-paced plot that are indicative of the original work and Indian culture.

Description

Still (a) from the movie, The River, shows three young women standing together against a railing by a river.

Still (b) from the movie, Pather Panchali, shows a young girl talking to a smiling old man.

Art cinema is an alternative narrative form that emerged around the world beginning in the 1950s. Often experimental and disorienting, these narratives interrogate the political assumptions of classical narratives by overturning their formal assumptions. Italian New Wave director Bernardo Bertolucci's *The Conformist* (1970) creates a sensually vague and dreamy landscape where reality and nightmares overlap. Through the mixed-up motivations of its central character, Marcello Clerici, the film explores the historical roots of Italian fascism, a viciously decadent world of sex and politics rarely depicted in the histories of classical narrative **[Figure 7.53]**.

7.53 ***The Conformist*** (1970). In this film by Italian director Bernardo Bertolucci, the historical roots of Italian fascism are imagined in an alternative narrative set within a dreamy landscape where reality and nightmares overlap.

Alternative narrative practices suggest not an opposition to classical narrative as much as a dialogue with that tradition. Of course, Indian film narratives are very different from African film narratives, and the art cinema of Jean-Luc Godard from France and Hou Hsiao-hsien from Taiwan engage divergent issues and narrative strategies. All, however, might be said to confront, in one way or another, the classical narrative paradigm.

FILM IN FOCUS Classical and Alternative Traditions in *Mildred Pierce* (1945) and *Daughters of the Dust* (1991)

See also: *Rebecca* (1940); *All About Eve* (1950); *Jeanne Dielman, 23 Quai du*

Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles (1975); *Vagabond* (1985)

To watch clips from *Mildred Pierce* (1945) and *Daughters of the Dust* (1991), go to LaunchPad for *The Film Experience* at **launchpadworks.com**

Very much a part of the classical movie tradition, the narrative of Michael Curtiz's *Mildred Pierce* (1945) is an extended flashback covering many years — from Mildred's troubled marriage and divorce, to her rise as a self-sufficient and enterprising businesswoman, and finally to her disastrous affair with the playboy Monty. After the opening murder and the accusation of Mildred, the narrative returns to her humble beginnings with two daughters and an irritating husband who soon divorces her. Left on her own, Mildred works determinedly to become a financial success and support her daughters. Despite her material triumphs, her youngest daughter, Kay, dies tragically, and her other daughter, Veda, rejects her and falls in love with Mildred's lover, Monty. The temporal and linear progressions in Mildred's material life are thus ironically offset in the narrative by the loss of her emotional and spiritual life.

In *Mildred Pierce*, we find all three cornerstones of classical film form. The title character, through her need and determination to survive and succeed, drives the main story. The narrative uses a flashback frame that, after the opening murder, proceeds linearly — from Mildred's life as a dutiful housewife and then a wealthy and vivacious socialite to her awareness of her tragic family life. Finally, the restricted narration follows her development as an objective record of those past events.

Set in the 1940s with little mention of World War II, *Mildred Pierce* is not a narrative located explicitly in public history, yet it is a historical tale that visibly embraces a crisis in the public narrative of America. While focused on Mildred's personal confusion, the film delineates a critical period in U.S. history. In the years after World War II, the U.S. nuclear family came under intense pressure as independent women with more freedom and power faced changing social structures. *Mildred Pierce* describes this public history in terms of personal experience; but like other classical narratives, the events, people, and logic of Mildred's story reflect a national story in which a new politics of gender, once admitted, must be incorporated into a tradition centered on the patriarchal family. *Mildred Pierce* aims directly at the incorporation of the private life (of Mildred) into a patriarchal public history (of the law, the community, and the nation). Mildred presumably recognizes the error of her independence and ambition and, through the guidance of the police, is restored to her former husband, strikingly and perhaps ironically summarized in the final image of the film in which two laboring working women visually counterpoint the reunited couple **[Figure 7.54]**.

7.54 *Mildred Pierce* (1945). Mildred's story reflects a larger national story about gender and labor.

As a very different kind of narrative, Julie Dash's *Daughters of the Dust* (1991) recounts a period of a few days in 1902 when members of an African American community prepare to move north from Ibo Landing, an island off the coast of South Carolina. The members of the Peazant family meld into a community whose place in time oscillates between their memories of their African heritage (as a kind of cyclical history) and their anticipation of a future on the U.S. mainland (where time progresses in a linear fashion) **[Figure 7.55]**.

7.55 ***Daughters of the Dust*** (1991). Like this mysterious floating statue that appears and reappears throughout the film, the narrative drifts between past and present, merging history, memory, and mythology.

Daughters of the Dust avoids concentrating on the motivations of a single character. Instead, it drifts among the perspectives of many members of the Peazant family — grandmother Nana, Haagar, Viola, Yellow Mary, the troubled married couple Eula and Eli, and even their unborn child.

For many viewers, the difficulty of following this film is related to its nontraditional narrative, which does not move its characters forward in the usual sense but instead depicts individuals who live in a time that seems more about communal rhythms than personal progress, where the distinctions between private and public life make little sense [**Figure 7.56**].

7.56 *Daughters of the Dust* (1991). Rather than focus on a single character, the narrative incorporates the perspectives of several Peazant family members.

A fundamental question or problem appears quietly at the beginning of the film: will the Peazant family's move to the U.S. mainland remove them from their roots and African heritage? Yet the film is more about presentation and reflection than about any drama or crisis emerging from that question. Eventually, that question may be answered when some of the characters move to the mainland, where they presumably will be recast in a narrative more like that of *Mildred Pierce*. But for now, in this narrative, they and the film embrace different temporal values.

In *Daughters of the Dust*, the shifting voices and perspectives of the narration have little interest in a unified or objective perspective on events **[Figure 7.57]**. Besides voiceovers by Nana and Eula, the narrative point of view appears through Unborn Child, a mysterious figure who is usually invisible to the other characters and who narrates as the voice of the future. Interweaving different subjective voices and experiences, the film's narration disperses time into the communal space of its island world, an orchestration of nonlinear rhythms. A public history is being mapped in this alternative film, one commonly ignored by other American

narratives and classical films. Especially with its explicit reflections on the slave trade that once passed through Ibo, *Daughters of the Dust* maps a part of African American history perhaps best told through the wandering narrative patterns inherited from the traditions and styles of African storytellers.

7.57 *Daughters of the Dust* (1991). As a story narrated in many voices, the film resists a unified perspective on events.

Chapter 7 Review

SUMMARY

- Movies thrive on **narrative**, the art and craft of constructing a story with a particular plot and point of view. Many film narratives follow a three-part structure with a beginning, a middle, and an ending.
- Film narrative has continually evolved over time and draws on earlier narrative traditions, like oral and operatic narratives.
    - Two important industrial events shaped early film narrative: the advancement of dialogue through sound; and the introduction of film scripts, or **screenplays**, written by **screenwriters**. Both of these developments allowed for more intricate narratives with more developed characters.
    - During the 1930s and 1940s, Hollywood established its dominant narrative form with three basic features: (1) a focus on one or two central characters, (2) a linear plot driven by the central characters, and (3) action developed according to cause-and-effect logic.
    - World War II disrupted the classical Hollywood narrative and gave rise to new cinemas that subverted traditional narrative form.
    - Film narratives today represent a diverse set of practices, but three are particularly significant: (1) massive film franchises,

including associated tie-ins and narrative continuity across multiple films; (2) *narrative reflexivity*, or attention to the narrative techniques employed by the filmmaker in the plot; and (3) elements from video games and other digital technologies.

- The main features of film narrative are story, plot, character, diegetic and nondiegetic elements, temporal and spatial organizations, and narrative perspective or narration.
  - **Story** refers to the actions and events in a narrative. The **plot** orders those actions and events according to particular temporal and spatial patterns.
  - **Characters** are the figures that focus or motivate the events of the story.
    - **Character coherence** is the product of expectations that view people, and thus fictional characters, as fundamentally consistent and unique. A film may uphold or subvert audience expectations about character coherence.
    - **Character depth** refers to the layers of traits that comprise a character as a unique individual.
    - Traditional narratives usually feature **protagonists**, whom the audience identifies as the positive forces in a film, and **antagonists**, who oppose the protagonists.
    - *Character types* are conventional characters (such as the hard-boiled detective) who share distinguishing features with other, similar characters and are prominent within particular narrative traditions. Some conventional

characters are **archetypes**, who reflect certain spiritual or abstract states or ideas.
    - When a film reduces a character to a set of static traits that identify him or her restrictively in terms of a social, physical, or cultural category, that character becomes a **stereotype**.
    - Characters usually change over the course of a realist film in the process known as **character development**.
    - The entire world that a story describes or that the viewer infers is called its **diegesis**. **Nondiegetic inserts** include material used to tell the story that are not part of its world, such as background music and **credits**.
- Most commonly, plots follow a **linear chronology** in which actions proceed one after another through a forward movement in time.
    - Some films use **flashbacks** or **flashforwards**, subverting audience expectations about linear chronology.
    - **Narrative duration** refers to the length of time an event or action is presented in a plot, whereas **narrative frequency** describes how often those plot elements are repeated.
- The organizing perspective through which plots are constructed is referred to as **narration**.
    - **First-person narration** refers to a story told from the perspective of a character in the film.
    - A **narrative frame** is a context or character positioned outside the story that brackets the film's narrative in a way that helps define its terms and meaning.

    - Most films use **third-person narration**, which depicts events objectively.
- There are two prominent types of narrative traditions in film: **classical Hollywood narrative**, which usually centers on one or two main characters who move the plot along with cause-and-effect logic; and **alternative film narrative**, which often deviates from or challenges linear narratives.

KEY TERMS

narrative
screenwriter
screenplay
story
character
plot
classical film narrative
character coherence
character depth
protagonist
antagonist
minor character
archetype
stereotype
character development
diegesis
nondiegetic insert
credits

linear chronology
flashback
flashforward
deadline structure
narrative duration
narrative frequency
psychological location
symbolic space
narration
narrator
first-person narration
narrative frame
third-person narration
omniscient narration
restricted narration
reflexive narration
unreliable narration
multiple narrations
anthology film
classical Hollywood narrative
postclassical narrative
alternative film narrative

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CHAPTER 8 DOCUMENTARY FILMS
Representing the Real

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Elizabeth Chai Vasarhelyi and Jimmy Chin's *Free Solo* (2018) is a subtle and powerful example of the many critical and provocative topics and strategies available to documentary cinema. Since John Grierson first described documentaries in 1926 as "the creative treatment of actuality," this particular film practice has continually explored those different actualities and realities in new and imaginative ways. *Free Solo* focuses on Alex Honnold, a rock climber intent on scaling the magnificent El

Capitan rock formation in Yosemite National Park in June 2017 — without the assistance of fellow climbers or safety lines. *Free Solo* is part personal documentary that follows one man's quest to achieve a sensational human feat, part thriller that records Honnold suspended from sheer cliffs and harrowing heights, part a celebration of stunning natural vistas, and part reflexive documentary that devotes considerable time to the complex relationship between the climber and a film crew determined not to be a distraction as part of this dangerous event. Often terrifying and often exhilarating, *Free Solo* is at first glance a simple film about a rock climber, but on closer examination its many layers and reverberations encapsulate many of the creative powers of documentaries over the past hundred years.

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For most of us, the film experience is primarily about elements like suspense, humor, or intense emotions. Yet that experience also can include the desire to be better informed about a person or an event, to engage with new and challenging ideas, or to learn more about what happens in other parts of the world. A nonfiction film that presents real objects, people, and events is commonly referred to as a **documentary**. John Grierson first used the term to describe a Robert Flaherty picture called *Moana* (1926) and its "visual account of events in the daily life of a Polynesian youth and his family." Broadly speaking, a documentary film is a visual and auditory

representation of the presumed facts, real experiences, and actual events of the world. Documentary films usually employ strategies and organizations that differ from those that define narrative cinema, such as plot and narration. Later Flaherty teamed up with German filmmaker F. W. Murnau to integrate the documentary world of *Moana* into the narrative film *Tabu: A Story of the South Seas* (1931) **[Figure 8.1]**, and this hybrid film raises key questions: How are documentary films different from narrative ones? What attracts us to them? How do they organize their material? What makes them popular, useful, and uniquely illuminating?

8.1 ***Tabu: A Story of the South Seas*** (1931). Following the documentary breakthrough of Robert Flaherty's earlier *Moana* (1926), Flaherty and F. W. Murnau's new project combines a

tragic love story with documentary images of Polynesian life.

Narrative films are about memory and the shaping of time, but documentary movies are about insight and learning — expanding what we can know, feel, and see. Narratives can enlarge and intensify the world for us in these ways as well, but because documentary movies do not have the primary task of telling a story, they can concentrate on leading our intellectual activities down new paths — in newsreels, theatrical films, PBS television broadcasts, and specials on cable TV or internet streaming services. Entertainment and artistry are not excluded from documentary films. *Apollo 11* (2019), for instance, follows Neil Armstrong, Buzz Aldrin, and Michael Collins on their historic trip to the moon in 1969. Consisting of archival footage (some of which had not previously been shown to the public), the film weaves the details of this monumental space adventure with moments of suspense (and even a bit of comedy). The mesmerizing soundtrack by Matt Morton underpins and supplements the combination of factual images and gripping entertainment **[Figure 8.2]**.

8.2 ***Apollo 11*** (2019). Entertainment and artistry intermingle in this historic documentary about the 1969 moon landing.

Although narrative films are at the heart of commercial entertainment, documentary movies operate according to an "economics of information" and usually rely on different sources of funding and different venues for exhibition for delivering their ideas and information. Many of the first films made in the 1890s and early 1900s, such as the traveling exhibitions and shows of Lyman H. Howe in America and Walter Haggar in England, were part of lectures, scientific presentations, or visual illustrations of the art of motion. Churches, schools, and cultural institutions supported and

financially subsidized these presentations, usually in the name of intellectual, spiritual, or cultural development. Since then, documentaries have remained, to some extent, tied to and often financially dependent on the private and public sponsorship of organizations such as museums, government agencies, local social activists, and cultural foundations. The Works Progress Administration (WPA) funded U.S. documentaries in the 1930s, and grants from the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) support some nonfiction films today. In addition, many documentaries are made for television, a phenomenon that has increased since the 1980s, when the deregulation of the broadcast industry encouraged the proliferation of cable networks such as Discovery Channel and History. For these channels, documentary programming has become a mainstay.

Although documentary films often claim and sometimes deserve the title "independent films," their survival has depended on a public culture that promotes learning as a crucial part of the film experience. Outside or on the fringes of commercial cinema, this "other" culture of films has endured and often triumphed through every period of film history and in virtually every world culture. In the following sections, we explore the many ways these films have expanded how we observe, listen, and think.

KEY OBJECTIVES

- Recognize that documentary films are best distinguished as cultural practices.
- Describe how documentary films employ nonfictional and non-narrative images and forms.
- Identify how documentary movies make and draw on specific historical heritages.
- Explain the common formal strategies and organizations used in documentary films.
- Summarize how documentary films have become associated with cultural values and traditions from which we develop filmic meaning.

A Short History of Documentary Cinema

From ancient government records and charts mapping new territories to family home movies and school textbooks, we explain and learn about the world in ways that stories cannot fully explore. For example, the thirteenth-century journals describing Marco Polo's travels through China or the early nineteenth-century treatise by Sir Humphry Davy on the discovery of electricity have, in their own ways, recorded lost worlds, offered new ideas, or changed how we see society.

At the end of the nineteenth century, the search for empirical and spiritual truths produced new educational practices, technological tools, colonial expeditions, and secret societies. These were vehicles to new experiences, pragmatic thought, and better worlds. In the midst of these trends, film was introduced in 1895 and used to illustrate lectures, offer cinematic portraits of famous people, and guide audiences through short movie travelogues. For many, film was not an art but a tool for investigating and explaining the physical and social worlds. The Edison Company stunned viewers in 1901 with a series of short films documenting the activities of President William McKinley on the day of his assassination, his funeral, and the transition of power to President Theodore Roosevelt **[Figure 8.3]**. Just as narrative films are rooted in cultural foundations and

histories that preceded the cinema by centuries, so too are documentary films.

8.3 ***President McKinley's Funeral Cortege at Buffalo, New York*** (1901). Compelling images of events surrounding President William McKinley's assassination were recorded by motion-picture cameras.

A Prehistory of Documentaries

For centuries, documentary cinema was anticipated by oral practices (such as sermons, political speeches, and academic lectures), visual practices (such as maps, photographs, and paintings), musical practices (such as folk songs and symphonies), and written practices (such as letters, diaries, poems, scientific

treatises, and newspaper reports). The essay form, in particular, is considered to have had a great influence on documentary cinema. Spearheaded by Michel de Montaigne, the essay form first appeared in the late sixteenth century and centered on personal and everyday subjects as a fragmented commentary on life and ideas.

Throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, journalism developed as a public forum for expressing ideas, announcing events, and recording daily happenings around town. Around 1800, Mary Wollstonecraft and Thomas Malthus wrote books, pamphlets, and lengthy essays describing the current state of society and insisting on practical ways that social science could improve people's lives. As the middle class moved to the center of Western societies in the nineteenth century, people demanded more information about the world.

Photography and photojournalism, evolving from new printing and lithographic technologies, became widespread and popular ways to record and comment on events. Unlike narrative practices, such as realistic novels or short stories, photojournalism presented virtually instantaneous and seemingly uncontestable records — factual representations of people and events frozen in time. One of the most dramatic combinations of social science and photography is Jacob Riis's book *How the Other Half Lives: Studies among the Tenements of New York* (1890) **[Figure 8.4]**, which is part lecture and part photo

essay. Its pseudoscientific sermon exposes and condemns living conditions in New York City's tenement housing.

Jacob August Riis/Library of Congress/Corbis Premium Historical/Getty Images

8.4 "Bandit's Roost," in *How the Other Half Lives: Studies among the Tenements of New York* (1890). Jacob Riis's book documents the squalor and dangers of tenement life in nineteenth-century New York.

Description
Overhead clotheslines are strung between buildings. Residents standing in the alleys wear suits, waistcoats, and a hats such as bowlers and stare at the photographer. A few residents peek through their windows.

1895–1905: Early Actualities, Scenics, and Topicals

The very first movies were frequently called **actualities** — nonfiction films introduced in the 1890s depicting real people and events through continuous footage, with the most famous being Louis and Auguste Lumière's *Workers Leaving the Lumière Factory* (1895). This film captivated audiences with its recording and presentation of a simple everyday activity without explanation or story line. A variation of these early nonfiction films called **scenics** offered remarkable images of nature or foreign lands. In Birt Acres's *Rough Sea at Dover* (1896), an immobile image shows waves crashing against a seawall, while other short scenics present views of Jerusalem or Niagara Falls. When these early films captured or sometimes re-created historical or newsworthy events, they were referred to as **topicals**, suggesting the kind of cultural, historical, or

political relevance usually found in newspapers. Around 1898, for example, the ongoing Spanish-American War figured in a number of topicals, often with battle scenes depicting the sinking in that year of the American ship USS *Maine*, which was re-created through miniatures. These factual and fabricated images of the war attracted large audiences.

The 1920s: Robert Flaherty and the Soviet Documentaries

Footage of distant lands continued to interest moviemakers and audiences even after narrative film became the norm around 1910. American adventurers Martin and Osa Johnson documented their travels in Africa and the South Seas in such popular films as *Jungle Adventures* (1921) and *Simba* (1928) **[Figure 8.5]**. But it was Robert Flaherty, often referred to as "the father of documentary cinema," who significantly expanded the powers and popularity of nonfiction film in the 1920s, most famously with his early works *Nanook of the North* (1922) and *Moana* (1926). Blending a romantic fascination with nature and an anthropological desire to document and record other civilizations, Flaherty identified new possibilities for funding these noncommercial films (largely through corporations) and, with the success of *Nanook*, identified new audiences interested in realistic films that were exciting even without stories and stars.

Courtesy of Milestone Film And Video

8.5 ***Simba*** (1928). Early documentaries took the shape of explorations of foreign lands and cultures, frequently transforming those worlds into objects of exotic fascination for audiences in Europe and in the United States. Here American adventurers Martin and Osa Johnson documented their travels in Africa and the South Seas.

At the same time, a very different kind of documentary was taking shape in Soviet cinema. Filmmakers such as Dziga Vertov and Esfir Shub saw timely political potential in creating documentary films with strong ideological messages conveyed through the formal technique of montage. In *The Fall of the Romanov Dynasty* (1927), Shub compiles and edits existing footage to show the historical conflicts between the aristocracy and the workers. In *Man with a Movie Camera* (1929), which became one of the most renowned "city

symphony" documentaries, Vertov re-creates and celebrates the energy of the everyday people and the activities of a modern city.

1930–1945: The Politics and Propaganda of Documentary

Perhaps more so than for other film practices, the introduction of **optical sound recording** — the process that converts sound waves into electrical impulses (which then control how a light beam is projected onto film) and that enables a soundtrack to be recorded alongside the image for simultaneous projection — catapulted documentary films forward in 1927. It made possible the addition of educational or social commentary to accompany images in newsreels, documentaries, and propaganda films. In the 1930s and 1940s, public institutions (such as the General Post Office in England, President Franklin D. Roosevelt's Resettlement Administration, and the National Film Board of Canada) as well as private groups (such as New York City's Film and Photo League) unhesitatingly supported documentary practices. These institutions prefigure the more contemporary supporters of documentary film, including the Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) in the United States, the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), and Zweites Deutsches Fernsehen (ZDF) in Germany.

Documentary film history can never really be divorced from these critical sources of funding and distribution. Perhaps the most

prominent figure to forge and develop a relationship between documentary filmmakers and those institutions that eventually funded them was British filmmaker John Grierson. From the late 1920s through the 1940s, as the first head of the National Film Board of Canada, Grierson promoted documentaries that dealt with social issues and established the institutional foundations that for years funded and distributed them. Government and institutional support for documentary cinema proceeded in a more troubling direction in the 1930s and 1940s in the form of **propaganda films** — political documentaries that visibly support and intend to sway viewers toward a particular social or political issue or group. Two famous examples are Leni Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will* (1935), commemorating the 1934 annual Nazi Party rally in Nuremberg, and *Japanese Relocation* (1943), a U.S. film justifying the internment of Japanese Americans on the West Coast **[Figures 8.6a and 8.6b]**.

(a) (b)

8.6 Propaganda films. Films like these — **(a)** *Triumph of the Will* (1935) and **(b)** *Japanese Relocation* (1943) — represent the disturbing propagandistic power of documentaries that are controlled and supported by governments and other institutional agents. Photofest, Inc.

Description
The first still from the movie, Triumph of the Will, shows a Nazi rally on the street of German city. The second still from the movie, Japanese Relocation, shows two passengers looking out from inside a bus.

1950s–1970s: New Technologies and the Arrival of Television

In the 1950s, changes in documentary practices followed the technological development of lightweight 16mm cameras, which allowed filmmakers a new kind of spontaneity and inventiveness when capturing reality. Most dramatic was **cinéma vérité** (a French term meaning "cinema truth") — a style of documentary filmmaking first practiced in France in the late 1950s and early 1960s that used unobtrusive, lightweight cameras and sound equipment to capture real-life situations. Documentary filmmakers like Jean Rouch, with films like *Moi un noir* (*I, a Black*) (1958), could now participate more directly and provocatively in the reality they filmed. This new mobile and independent method of documentary filmmaking advanced again in the late 1950s with the development of portable magnetic sync-sound recorders and then again in 1968 with the introduction of Portapak video equipment. Armed with a lightweight camera and the ability to record direct sound, filmmakers could now document actions and events that previously remained hidden or at a distance. Rouch's later film, *Chronicle of a*

Summer (1961), has become a classic example of these new cinéma vérité possibilities, featuring random encounters with people on the streets of Paris, who answer questions and give their opinions on happiness, war, politics, love, and work.

Sometimes referred to as the golden age of television documentary, this period also brought a rapid expansion of documentaries aimed at a new television audience. Merging older documentary traditions with television news reportage, these programs often were noted for their tough honesty and social commitment. The work of television journalist Edward R. Murrow, who critiqued Senator Joseph McCarthy's unfair accusations of treason against people working in government, entertainment, education, and unions, set a new benchmark for news reporting.

Perhaps the best-known example of the convergence of new technology, a more mobile style, and television reportage is Robert Drew's *Primary*, a 1960 film about the Democratic presidential primary election in Wisconsin between John F. Kennedy and Hubert H. Humphrey **[Figure 8.7]**. This documentary was produced for the series *ABC Close-Up!* (1960–1985) by Drew Associates, the organization that trained many of the documentary filmmakers associated with **direct cinema** — a documentary style originating in the United States in the 1960s that aims to capture unfolding events as unobtrusively as possible.

8.7 ***Primary*** (1960). This documentary about John F. Kennedy's presidential campaign took advantage of the mobility and immediacy produced by new camera and sound equipment.

1980s–Present: Digital Cinema, Cable, and Reality TV

In the 1980s, the consumer video camera was taken up by artists and activists, such as the AIDS collective called Testing the Limits, which used **activist videos** — confrontational political documentaries that use low-cost video equipment — as part of the democratization of the documentary that continued with the rapid shift to digital formats. After the introduction in the late 1980s of Avid's nonlinear

digital editing process, which made editing much easier and less expensive, the documentary **shooting ratio** — the relationship between the overall amount or length of film shot and the amount used in the finished project — increased exponentially. This led to the growth of personal documentaries, which eventually achieved theatrical exposure in such films as Morgan Spurlock's quirky tale of his fast-food consumption quest, *Super Size Me* (2004) **[Figure 8.8]**. During this period, changes in the distribution and exhibition of documentaries significantly affected the availability and popularity of these films.

8.8 ***Super Size Me*** (2004). Morgan Spurlock had regular medical checkups in this personal documentary on fast-food diets and their effects on American obesity.

In addition to increased festival and theatrical exposure and the expanding video rental market, cable and satellite television

networks provide more and more opportunities for documentary projects. Under Sheila Nevins, HBO's documentary division sponsored numerous powerful and acclaimed films, including *Born into Brothels* (2004) and *If God Is Willing and da Creek Don't Rise* (2010). By contrast, the nature documentary *Penguins* (2019) was produced by Disneynature, a division of Walt Disney Studios. The film garnered critical praise and wide audiences for its state-of-the-art, high-definition cinematography and conservation message **[Figure 8.9]**. Meanwhile, public television and cable networks provide more venues for independently produced documentaries that otherwise may have limited distribution.

8.9 *Penguins* (2019). Although relatively few documentaries receive wide national releases, Disney has seen success in recent years with its series of nature films.

The Elements of Documentary Films

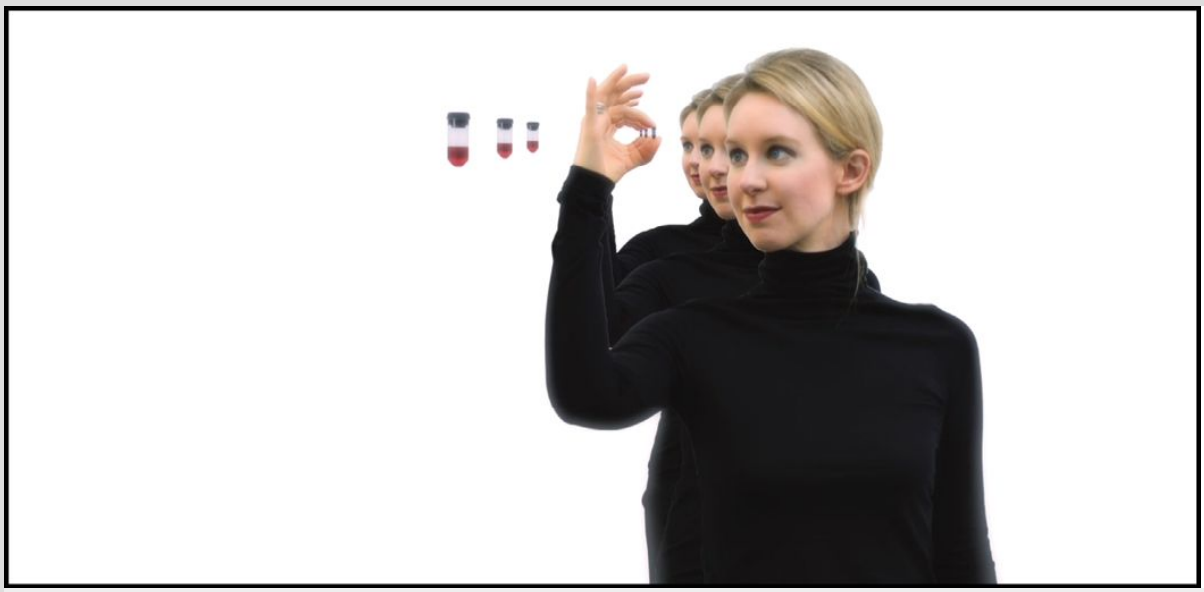
The documentary film shares elements of cinematic form with narrative and experimental films, but it organizes its material, constitutes its authority, and engages the audience in a distinct fashion. The following section outlines the modes of discourse, organizational patterns, and methods of presenting a point of view typical of the documentary film.

Nonfiction and Non-Narrative

Two cornerstones of documentary films — nonfiction and non-narrative — are key concepts that are often debated. Although documentary films and experimental films (see Chapter 9) can both be described as non-narrative, nonfiction has primarily been associated with documentary films. **Nonfiction films** are films presenting factual descriptions of actual events, persons, or places rather than their fictional or invented re-creation. Attempts to make a hard-and-fast distinction between "factual descriptions" and "fictional re-creations" have provoked heated debates throughout film history because facts are arguably malleable. Nonetheless, a fundamental distinction can be made between, say, a PBS documentary about the life of Elizabeth II of the United Kingdom

and Stephen Frears's feature film *The Queen* (2006) about the same person. The first film uses the accounts of journalists, news media, and historians to show the facts and complex issues in the life of one of the great women of history. The second film uses some of the same information about the same woman but focuses on events immediately following the death of Princess Diana and the queen's relationship with Prime Minister Tony Blair in order to re-create a dramatic and entertaining episode in her life.

Nonfiction can be used in a variety of creative ways. In *The Inventor: Out for Blood in Silicon Valley* (2019), Alex Gibney pursues a nonfictional, behind-the-scenes investigation of Elizabeth Holmes and her company Theranos, which promised a revolutionary blood testing technology but which ultimately collapsed when it was revealed that the technology did not actually exist **[Figure 8.10]**. In contrast, in *Of Great Events and Ordinary People* (1979), Raoul Ruiz turns an assignment to conduct nonfictional interviews in a Paris neighborhood into a complex and humorous reflection on the impossibility of revealing any truth or honesty through the interview process.



8.10 ***The Inventor: Out for Blood in Silicon Valley*** (2019). This film from the prolific Alex Gibney is a nonfiction investigation of the rise and fall of Elizabeth Holmes and her false claims about her company Theranos.

Non-narrative films — films organized in a variety of ways besides storytelling — eschew or deemphasize stories and narratives and instead employ other forms (like lists, repetition, or contrasts) as their organizational structure. For example, a non-narrative film might create a visual list (of objects found in an old house, for instance), repeat a single image as an organizing pattern (returning to an ancient carving on the front door of the house), or alternate between objects in a way that suggests fundamental differences (contrasting the rooms, clothing, and tools used by the men and the women in a house).

A non-narrative movie may embed stories within its organization, but those stories usually become secondary to the non-narrative

pattern. In *Koyaanisqatsi* (1983), slow-motion and time-lapse photography capture the open vistas of an American landscape and their destruction — pristine fields and mountains, rusty towns, and garbage-strewn highways — set against the drifting tones of Philip Glass's music **[Figure 8.11]**. Through these images, one may detect traces of a story about the collapse of America in what the Hopi Indian title declares is "a life out of balance," but that simple and vague narrative is not nearly as powerful as the emotional force of the film's accumulating visual repetitions and contrasts. Diane Keaton's *Heaven* (1987) intersperses clips from old movies with angels and other images of heaven and presents a litany of faces and voices to answer such questions as "Does heaven exist?" and "Is there sex in heaven?" Although we may sense a religious mystery tale behind these questions and answers, this movie is better understood as a playful list of unpredictable reactions to the possibility of a life hereafter.

8.11 ***Koyaanisqatsi*** (1983). A non-narrative catalog of images contrasts America's beauty and decay.

VIEWING CUE

Is the film you have just seen in class best described as nonfiction or non-narrative? What elements helped you decide which categorization was more appropriate?

Nonfiction and non-narrative approaches suggest distinctive ways of seeing the world. Although they often overlap in documentary films, one form of presentation does not necessarily imply the other. A non-narrative film may be entirely or partly fictional; conversely, a nonfiction film can be constructed as a narrative. Complicating these distinctions is the fact that both kinds of practices can become

less a function of the intentions of the film than of viewers' perception. What may seem nonfictional or non-narrative in one context may not seem so in another. For example, audiences in the 1920s mostly assumed that *Nanook of the North* (1922) was a nonfictional account of an Inuit tribesman and his family. Now, most viewers recognize that some of the central events and actions were fabricated for the documentary. Similarly, for some viewers, *The Cove* (2009) is a non-narrative exposé of the capture and slaughter of dolphins by Japanese fishermen, while for others it is a dramatic narrative about a group of activists on a rescue mission. The different meanings of nonfiction and non-narrative can shift historically and perceptually, however, which makes the categories useful in judging the strategies of a particular documentary as part of changing cultural contexts and as a reflection of an audience's point of view.

Expositions: Organizations That Show or Describe

Although narrative film relies on specific patterns to shape the material realities of life into imaginative histories, the documentary employs strategies and forms that resemble scientific and educational methods. For example, the 2015 feature film *The Walk* is a narrative about Phillippe Petit, a French high-wire artist who in 1974 walked between the tops of the two World Trade Center buildings on a thin wire. Replete with chronological suspense,

intrigue, special effects, and even romance, this narrative moves crisply forward to culminate in a heroic conclusion, cheered on by the New Yorkers who watch the walk **[Figure 8.12]**. The 2008 documentary *Man on Wire*, conversely, develops in a nonlinear fashion, presents actual footage of the walk, has Petit himself explain much of his planning, interjects commentary by other participants in the event, and inserts home movies of his training.

8.12 *The Walk* (2015). This narrative feature film tells the same story as the 2008 documentary *Man on Wire*, with cutting-edge 3-D cinematography in place of *Man on Wire*'s actual footage.

The formal expositional strategies used in documentary movies are known as *documentary organizations*. These organizations show or describe experiences in a way that differs from narrative films — that is, without the temporal logic of narrative and without a presiding focus on how a central character motivates and moves events forward. Traditional documentaries tend to observe the facts

of life from a distance and organize their observations as objectively as possible to suggest some definition of the subject through the exposition itself.

Here we discuss three distinctive organizations of documentary films — cumulative, contrastive, and developmental. These organizations may appear in different films or may be used in some combination in the same film. Then we explore how the use of these organizational patterns is often governed by the perspective — or *rhetorical position* — from which a film's observations are made.

Cumulative Organizations

Cumulative organizations present a catalog of images or sounds throughout the course of the film. It may be a simple series with no recognizable logic connecting the images. Joris Ivens's *Rain* (1929) presents images from a rainstorm in Amsterdam, showing the rain falling in a multitude of different ways and from many different angles **[Figure 8.13]**. We do not sense that we are watching this downpour from beginning to end but instead see this rain as the accumulation of its seemingly infinite variety of shapes, movements, and textures. Another example of cumulative organization is *Thirty Two Short Films About Glenn Gould* (1993). Although some viewers may expect a biography of the renowned pianist Gould, the film intentionally fragments his life into numerical episodes focused on his playing, on his acquaintances

discussing him, and on reenactments of moments in his life [Figure 8.14].

8.13 ***Rain*** (1929). The accumulation of images of different kinds of rain showers gradually creates a poetic documentary of various shapes and textures.

Rhombus Media/Telefilm Canada/Kobal/Shutterstock

8.14 ***Thirty-Two Short Films About Glenn Gould*** (1993). As an expositional organization, the film offers a glimpse into the life of the notoriously elusive genius through snippets of performance footage intermixed with reenactments of moments in his life.

Contrastive Organizations

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Examine carefully the organization of this clip from *The Cove* (2009). Does it follow a clear formal strategy? Explain.

As a variation on cumulative organization, contrastive organizations present a series of contrasts or oppositions that indicate different points of view on its subject. Thus, a film may alternate between images of war and peace or between contrasting skylines of different cities. Sometimes these contrasts may be evaluative, distinguishing positive and negative events. At other times, contrastive exposition may suggest a more complicated relationship between objects or individuals. Among the most ambitious versions of this technique is a group of films by Michael Apted, beginning with his documentary *7 Up* (1964) and followed by successive films made every seven years. The nine films in the *Up* series (1964–2019) track the changing attitudes and social situations of a group of children as they grow into the adults of *63 Up* (2019). With a new film appearing every seven years, these films contrast the differences

among developing individuals in terms of class, gender, and family life and in their changing outlooks as they grow older. This emphasis on the contrasting shapes of these developments differs significantly from the fiction film *Boyhood* (2014), where the use of the same actor as he matures over a decade emphasizes the coherence of the development.

Developmental Organizations

With developmental organizations, places, objects, individuals, or experiences are presented through a pattern that has a non-narrative logic or structure but still follows a logic of change or progression. For example, an individual may be presented as growing from small to large, as changing from a passive to an active personality, or as moving from the physical to the spiritual. In *Faces Places* (2017), filmmaker Agnes Varda and photographer-muralist JR travel around the villages and towns of rural France interviewing a spectrum of individuals, while JR creates large photographs of people that are then displayed on buildings. On one hand, the documentary develops as an expanding map of French society; on the other, a parallel development follows the emerging friendship between the two artists as they share visions and histories **[Figure 8.16]**. A year later, the 2018 *RBG* documents Supreme Court justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg's life through her personal relationships and through her landmark social and legal accomplishments,

transforming a quiet and intellectual woman into a popular icon and heroine [Figure 8.17].

8.16 ***Faces Places*** (2017). Against the journey of a filmmaker and a photographer through France, the encounter with new faces maps the development of a new relationship between the two image makers.

8.17 *RBG* (2018). An intimate chronicle of Ruth Bader Ginsburg progresses through her private life and loves to her powerful interventions in the causes of social justice and women's rights.

FILM IN FOCUS Nonfiction and Non-Narrative in *Stories We Tell* (2013)

See also: *Daughter Rite* (1980); *Bright Leaves* (2003); *Capturing the Friedmans* (2003)

FILM IN FOCUS
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To watch a video about *Stories We Tell* (2013), go to LaunchPad for *The Film Experience* at **launchpadworks.com**

Sarah Polley's *Stories We Tell* (2013) is an example of the organizational and rhetorical possibilities that have made contemporary documentaries so exciting and often surprising. Years earlier, Polley had established an active acting career and had directed two powerful narrative feature films, *Away from Her* (2006) and *Take this Waltz* (2012), both subtle and sensitive depictions of the difficult dynamics of adult relationships. Her first documentary, *Stories We Tell*, explores her own family history, as Polley questions other family members, views old home movies, investigates newspapers and other documents, and eventually turns to DNA testing to determine if her presumed father is in fact her biological father. This complex film is aligned with the traditions of both the personal documentary and the essay film.

In one sense, the film deftly employs all three major documentary expositional strategies. The early part of the film introduces various family members (including siblings Mark, John, Joanna, Susy) and an array of friends of Polley's mother, Diane, as "talking head" figures who comment on Diane's life, their experiences with this dynamic woman, and her early death from cancer. Woven within these commentaries and remembrances is a series of old photographs and clips of home-movie sequences in which Diane frolicks around the house, plays at the beach, and at one point sings "Ain't Misbehavin" on an audition tape. Gradually, this oblique portrait begins to reveal various contrasts in Diane's personality that suggest an increasingly complex history of a person who, for all her extroversion and exuberance, was "a woman with secrets." Indeed, the central secret that the film gradually uncovers is the nature and source of a pregnancy that produced Sarah herself.

The accumulation of those different perspectives eventually focuses on a specific question about Sarah's true biological father. Sarah, who is visually and audibly prominent throughout the film, pursues this central question and related questions about her parents' relationship and her own birth. She contrasts three possible fathers: Michael, the father whom she knows and loves despite some professed difficulties in his marriage with Diane; Geoffrey Bowes, an actor in a Montreal production where Diane worked decades earlier; and Harry Gulkin, a

well-known film producer who was also in Montreal at the time. These contrasting father figures become a version of the larger philosophical contrasts that organize this documentary around the different “stories we tell” about our experiences and lives.

The film’s title indicates a focus on individual tales about Diane, and the expositional organization develops through these little narratives. The “stories” of the title have been shaded and shaped by the limits and prejudices of memory. Ultimately, they demonstrate that no overarching narrative can fully explain Diane’s character, personality, and history. One of the possible fathers, Harry Gulkin, claims, toward the conclusion of the film, that only two people have the “right” to tell the story of Diane’s affair because only she and he were there. Otherwise, he says, “you can’t ever touch bottom.” Indeed, for Sarah Polley, that elusive “bottom” of any experience or personality can never be touched or documented, which is perhaps the fundamental truth of this film. While there may be a verifiable reality or truth enmeshed within these different perspectives, its status as truth remains a protean and elusive notion that can never be fully secured.

Early on, Polley describes the interviews that organize the film as part of an “interrogation process,” the primary rhetorical position of the film. Yet just as it contrasts and complicates the truth of its talking-head interviews and anecdotes, *Stories We Tell* twists that interrogation process in particularly contemporary ways, making it is as much an interrogation of Polley as subject and identity as it is of the other players and family members in this drama. The film engages and undermines the narrative interrogation that supports most memories and, at the same time, calls attention to its own work as a personal film that uses theatrical and reflexive reenactments to undermine the reliable objectivity of any perspective.

For example, the film begins with a dramatically reflexive sequence in which Polley brings her father, Michael, to a recording booth where he hesitantly reads and reenacts the narration that we later learn he wrote for the film. At different points, Michael reads voiceover narration that, we later learn, he was inspired to write

because of the film's climactic revelation and because of his subsequently renewed bond with Sarah. As Michael moves in and out of his own narrative, he appears sometimes as part of a third-person perspective on his history, while, at other times, he expresses himself through a first-person testimony about his experiences with Diane. In other words, he reenacts as performance the story that he wrote of his own life. Throughout this narration, Sarah regularly interrupts Michael to have him reread lines ("take that line back") and so calls attention to the construction of narration itself. As a related strategy, past events in the film are often presented through what seems to be authentic found footage and home movies, but in the second half of the film, many of these clips are revealed as reenactments with scenes reconstructed and actors playing the roles of the main characters. Like the deconstruction of Michael's narrative, these reenactments transform what at first seems like traditional documentary footage into a dramatization that may or may not be fully accurate **[Figure 8.15]**.

8.15 ***Stories We Tell*** (2013). An inventive mixture of nonfiction and fiction, the film moves between Michael's narration, Sarah's investigation, and dramatization as a reenactment.

Although the many stories and personal testimonies about Diane seem to make her the heart of the film, the reflexive frame and the use of reenactments gradually and surprisingly repositions the film's perspective and meaning, implying that what happened in Diane's history may not be the most important truth. When, near the conclusion, Sarah reveals to Michael that he is in fact not her biological father, she hugs him in a way that, according to him, "made the revelation worth it," so that for both him and Sarah, the search through Diane's past and the truth that it revealed through DNA "doesn't make any difference." Rather than just a documentary about a mother who will never be completely known, *Stories We Tell* becomes a film about the love, affection, and loyalty of a daughter for the father who raised her — and the status of that love and affection as a truth that requires a dramatically different kind of documentary to represent it.

Rhetorical Positions

Just as narrative cinema uses different types of narrators and narration to tell stories from a certain angle, documentary and experimental films employ their own rhetorical positions — or organizational points of view — that shape their formal practices according to certain perspectives and attitudes. Sometimes these films might assume the neutral stance of the uninvolved observer — referred to as the "voice of God" because of its assumed authority and objectivity. At other times, the point of view of the documentary assumes a more limited or even personal perspective. Whether clearly visible and heard, omniscient or personal, or merely implied by the film's organization, the rhetorical positions of documentary

films generally articulate their attitudes and positions according to four principal frameworks:

- to explore the world and its peoples
- to interrogate or analyze an event or a problem
- to persuade the audience of a certain truth or point of view
- to reflect the presence and activity of the filmmaking process or the filmmaker

Sometimes these frameworks overlap in a single film. For example, the voice of Peter Davis's *Hearts and Minds* (1974) is both explorative and polemical as it uses strategically placed interviews and newsreel footage to tear apart the myths supporting the Vietnam War. *Where to Invade Next* (2015), a film that centers on director Michael Moore's perspective on how other countries compare to the United States, offers an often exaggerated performance as a clearly argumentative perspective meant to incite and arouse audiences and to sway opinion on social and economic programs **[Figure 8.18]**.

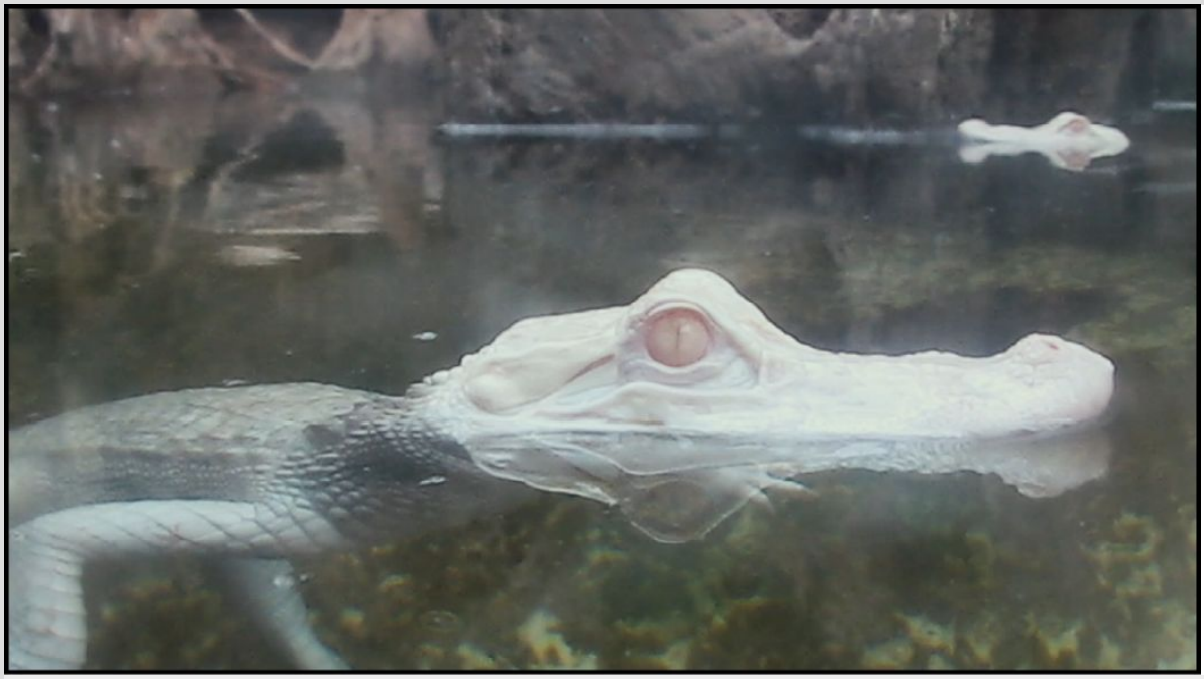
8.18 ***Where to Invade Next*** (2015). This documentary explores cultures outside the United States, from Finland to Tunisia, as part of filmmaker Michael Moore's argument about where America lags behind other countries in the areas of healthcare, women's leadership, and decriminalized drugs.

Explorative Positions

Explorative positions announce or suggest that the film's driving perspective is a scientific search into particular social, psychological, or physical phenomena. Informed by this position, a documentary assumes the perspective of a traveler, an explorer, or an investigator who encounters new worlds, facts, or experiences and aims to present and describe these straightforwardly, often as a witness. Travel films have existed since the first days of cinema, when filmmakers offered short records of awe-inspiring locations such as Niagara Falls or the Great Wall of China. The first feature-

length documentaries extended that explorative curiosity, positioning the travel film somewhere between the anthropologist's urge to show different civilizations and peoples, as in Flaherty's *Nanook of the North* (1922) **[Figure 8.19]**, and the tourist's pleasure of visiting novel sites and locations, as in Jean Vigo's tongue-in-cheek wanderings through a French resort town in *Apropos of Nice* (1930). More recently, Werner Herzog's *Cave of Forgotten Dreams* (2010) mobilizes 3-D technology to explore the Chauvet cave drawings in southern France, offering a stunning commentary on these prehistoric paintings and their anticipation of cinematic movement **[Figure 8.20]**.

8.19 ***Nanook of the North*** (1922). Many documentaries mimic the anthropologist's project of exploring other cultures — in this case, the rituals and daily routines of an Inuit family.

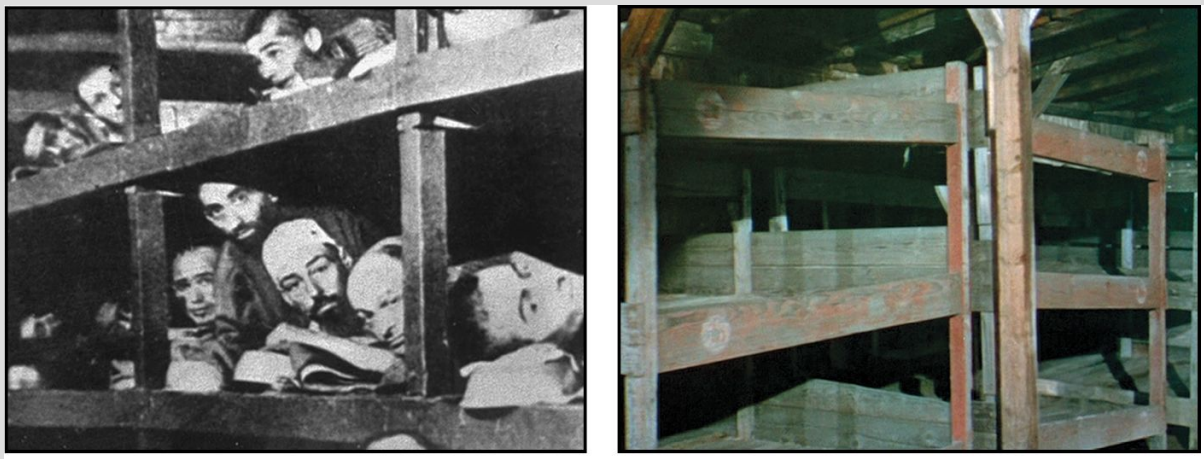


8.20 ***Cave of Forgotten Dreams*** (2010). Werner Herzog's 3-D images of the Chauvet cave in southern France allow him to explore this space in ways never before possible.

Interrogative Positions

Interrogative or analytical positions rhetorically structure a movie in a way that identifies the subject as being under investigation — either through an implicit or explicit question-and-answer format or by other, more subtle techniques. Commonly condensed in the interview format found in many documentary films, interrogative techniques also can employ a voiceover or an on-camera voice that asks questions of individuals or objects that may or may not respond

to the questioning. Frank Capra's *Why We Fight* series (1943–1945) explicitly formulates itself as an inquisition into the motivations for the U.S. involvement in World War II, whereas in Trinh T. Minh-ha's *Surname Viet Given Name Nam* (1989), a question or problem may only be implied, and succeeding images may either resolve the problem or not. Errol Morris's *Fog of War* (2003) creates a visually and musically complex forum, filmed with an innovative camera device he called the "Interrotron," through which he elicits strained explanations about the catastrophe of the Vietnam War from Robert McNamara, the former secretary of defense. One of the most profound and subtlest examples of the interrogative or analytical form is Alain Resnais's *Night and Fog* (1955), which offers images without answers **[Figures 8.21a and 8.21b]**. In short, interrogative and analytical forms may lead to more knowledge or may simply raise more questions than they answer.



(a) (b)

8.21a and 8.21b *Night and Fog* (1955). As images of liberated survivors of the Nazi concentration camps alternate with contemporary images of the same empty camps, the complex organizational refrain of the film becomes, "Who is responsible?"

Description
The first still shows men laying, crowded together, in barracks beds. The second still shows the barracks empty.

Persuasive Positions

Watch this clip from *He Named Me Malala* (2015). Describe the presiding voice or attitude with as much detail as possible. How does the dominant rhetorical argument position the subject it addresses? Can you imagine another way of filming this subject? Explain.

The use of interrogation and analysis in a documentary film often (but not always) is intended to convince or persuade a viewer about

certain facts or truths. Persuasive positions articulate a perspective that expresses a personal or social position using emotions or beliefs and aim to persuade viewers to feel and see in a certain way. Some films do so through voices and interviews that attempt to convince viewers of a particular cause. In *An Inconvenient Sequel: Truth to Power* (2017), a follow up to his 2006 documentary *An Inconvenient Truth*, former vice president Al Gore presents film clips demonstrating the continuing need to address global warming **[Figure 8.22]**. Other movies may downplay the presence of the personal perspective and instead use images and sounds to influence viewers through argument or emotional appeal, as in propagandistic movies that urge certain political or social views. Leni Riefenstahl's infamous *Triumph of the Will* (1935) allows grandiose compositions of images to convince viewers of the glorious powers of the Nazi party. Meanwhile, in *Pussy Riot: A Punk Prayer* (2013), the dramatic protests of three young Russian women against the repressions in Russian society are presented, as are their subsequent three-year prison sentences, and the energetic rhythms of the music and the absurdities of the trial persuasively expose the Russian church's support of a repressive government.

8.22 ***An Inconvenient Sequel: Truth to Power*** (2017). With sometimes shocking images, Al Gore aims to persuade his audience not only about the dangers of global warming but also about the way global activism can change the world.

Persuasive forms also can rely solely on the power of documentary images themselves. Erroll Morris's *The Unknown Known* (2013), for example, allows former Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld to speak for himself, through interviews and news clips, with very little critical examination. However, through this transparent frame, Rumsfeld reveals a rather uninformed and twisted perspective that led to the 2003 invasion of Iraq **[Figure 8.23]**. With such movies, what we are being persuaded to do or think may not be immediately evident, yet it usually is obvious that we are engaged in a rhetorical argument that involves visual facts, intellectual statements, and sometimes emotional manipulation.

8.23 ***The Unknown Known*** (2013). Allowing clips and interviews to speak for themselves, this film is a searing critique of former Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld.

Reflexive and Performative Positions

Reflexive and performative positions call attention to the filmmaking process or perspective of the filmmaker in determining or shaping the documentary material being presented. Often this means calling attention to the making of the documentary or the process of watching a film itself. Certain films — like Laleen Jayamanne's *A Song of Ceylon* (1985), which references the classical documentary *Song of Ceylon* (1934) through its meditation on colonialism and gender in Sri Lanka — aim to remind viewers that documentary reality and history are always mediated by the film image and that documentary films do not necessarily offer an easy access to truth. This focus can shift from the filmmaking process to

the filmmaker, thus emphasizing the participation of that individual as a kind of performer of reality.

A classic example of a reflexive and performative documentary, Orson Welles's *F for Fake* (1974) wittily meditates on powers of illusion that bind filmmaking, art forgery, fraud, and the illusions of magicians. In Ross McElwee's *Sherman's March* (1986), the filmmaker sets out on a journey to document General William Tecumseh Sherman's conquest of the South during the Civil War. Along the way, however, this witty film becomes more about the filmmaker's own failed attempts to start or maintain a romantic relationship with the many women he meets **[Figure 8.24]**.

8.24 ***Sherman's March*** (1986). A personal documentary about the filmmaker's attempt to make a historical film that becomes a reflexive performance about love, women, and making movies.

Thinking about Documentary Films

Although moviegoers have always been attracted to a film's entertainment value, audiences also appreciated the cultural and educational values of nonfiction movies produced as early as the 1890s. These films presented sporting events, political speeches, and dramatic presentations of Shakespeare. In 1896, for instance, the Lumière brothers took audiences on an educational railway trip with the "phantom ride" of *Leaving Jerusalem by Railway* **[Figure 8.25]**. According to these practices, the documentary presumably could offer unmediated truths or factual insights that were unavailable through strictly narrative experiences. Regardless of how this basic view of the documentary may have changed since then, presenting presumed social, historical, or cultural truths or facts remains the foundation on which documentary films are built.

8.25 ***Leaving Jerusalem by Railway*** (1896). Early films allowed audiences to experience the pleasure and education of visiting new lands and vistas.

Perhaps more than narrative cinema, documentary films expand and complicate how we understand the world. The relationship between documentary films and the cultural and historical expectations of viewers thus plays a large part in how these movies are understood. Luis Buñuel's *Land Without Bread* (1933) might seem to be a kind of travelogue about a remote region of Spain — Las Hurdes — but its bitingly ironic soundtrack commentary, which flatly understates the brutal misery, poverty, and degradation in the region, makes the film a searing political commentary on the failure

of the state and church to care adequately for the people who live there. So unmistakable was the message of this film, in fact, that the Spanish government repressed it. Without its cultural context, this film might seem odd or confusing to some viewers today, reminding us that in order to locate the significance of a film, we often must understand the historical, social, and cultural contexts in which it was made.

What makes a documentary film you have recently seen meaningful? How does it achieve its aims and make its values apparent?

Throughout the history of documentaries, viewers have found these films most significant in their ability to reveal new or ignored realities not typically seen in narrative films and to confront assumptions and alter opinions.

Confronting Assumptions

Because narrative movies dominate the cinematic scene, documentary films commonly have a differential value: that is, successful documentary films offer different kinds of truth from narrative movies. Often this means revealing new or ignored realities by showing people, events, or levels of reality we have not seen before because they have been excluded either from our social

experience or from our experiences of narrative films. To achieve these kinds of fresh insights, documentaries often question the basic terms of narratives — such as the centrality of characters, the importance of a cause-and-effect chronology, or the necessity of a narrative point of view — or they draw on perspectives or techniques that would seem out of place in a narrative movie.

By showing us an object or a place from angles and points of view beyond the realistic range of human vision, such films place us closer to a newly discovered reality. We might see the bottom of a deep ocean through the power of an underwater camera or the flight of migrating birds from their perspectives in the skies. Perhaps an object will be presented for an inordinately long amount of time, showing minute changes that we rarely see in our usual experiences. One hypothetical movie might condense the gestation of a child in the womb, and another might show the dread and boredom that a homeless person experiences over one long night in Miami. David and Albert Maysles's *Grey Gardens* (1975) portrays the quirky extremes of a mother and daughter, relatives of Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis, who live in a dilapidated mansion in East Hampton, Long Island. Slowly, by following their daily routines and dwelling on the incidentals in their lives, the film develops our capacity to see two individuals whose unique personalities and habits become less and less strange **[Figure 8.26]**.

8.26 *Grey Gardens* (1975). The relationship between two quirky and unusual women becomes a touching and entertaining documentary about individualism and humanity.

Altering Opinions

Documentary films may present a familiar or well-known subject and attempt to make us comprehend it in a new way. Some documentaries are openly polemical when presenting a subject. As an obvious example, documentaries about a political figure or a controversial event may confront viewers' assumptions or attempt to alter currently held opinions about the person or event. Other films

may ask us to rethink a moment in history or our feelings about what once seemed like a simple exercise, as in *Honeyland* (2019), a documentary about the art and ecopolitics of beekeeping in Macedonia **[Figure 8.27]**.

8.27 *Honeyland* (2019). This documentary offers viewers new perspectives on the culture and poetry of beekeeping in an isolated mountain community.

With any and all of the formal and organizational tools available to a documentary, these films attempt to persuade viewers of certain facts, attack other points of view, argue with other films, or motivate viewers to act on social problems or concerns. An especially explicit example is Michael Moore's *Sicko* (2007), which visibly and tendentiously argues that the healthcare system in the United States is antiquated and destructive and needs to be changed. Released the

same year, the documentary *Manufacturing Dissent: Uncovering Michael Moore* (2007) takes Moore and his many films to task for fudging or misrepresenting facts. Such polemic is central to this tradition of documentary cinema, which is always about which reality we wish to accept.

Interpretive Contexts and Traditions

From the two primary agendas discussed above come four traditions of documentary cinema — the social documentary, the historical documentary, the ethnographic film, and the personal or subjective documentary. These four traditions encompass some of the main frameworks for understanding many documentary films throughout the twentieth century.

The Social Documentary Tradition

Social documentaries examine issues, people, and cultures in a social context. Using a variety of organizational practices, this tradition emphasizes one or both of the following goals: authenticity (in representing how people live and interact) and discovery (in representing unknown environments and cultures). John Grierson, considered by some scholars and filmmakers as the father of documentary, made his first film, *Drifters* (1929), about North Sea herring fishermen. Another early British filmmaker, Humphrey Jennings, continued this tradition with *Listen to Britain* (1942), a

twenty-minute panorama of British society at war — from soldiers in the fields to women in factories. Indeed, the social documentary tradition is long and varied, stretching from Pare Lorentz's *The River* (1937) — made for the U.S. Department of Agriculture about the importance of the Mississippi River — to *Waste Land* (2010), about artist Vik Muniz's encounter with a community of people who live in and off the world's largest landfill on the outskirts of Rio de Janeiro. An important spin-off from the social documentary tradition is the political documentary. Another subcategory of social documentary that has proliferated in recent decades is indigenous cinema.

The Political Documentary

Partially as a result of the social crisis of the Great Depression in the United States and the more general economic crises that occurred in most other countries after World War I, early political documentaries aimed to investigate and to celebrate the political activities of men and women as they appear within the struggles of small and large social spheres. Contrasting themselves with the lavish Hollywood films of the times, these early documentary films sought to balance aesthetic objectivity and political purpose. Preceded by the films of Dziga Vertov and the Soviet cinema of the 1920s, such as *Man with a Movie Camera* (1929), political documentaries from the mid-twentieth century tend to take analytical or persuasive positions, hoping to provoke or move viewers with the will to reform social systems. Narrated by Ernest

Hemingway, Joris Ivens's *The Spanish Earth* (1937) presents, for example, the Republican faction of the Second Spanish Republic as heroes fighting against fascist Nationalist rebels. Although political documentaries such as these can sometimes be labeled propaganda films because of their visible efforts to support a particular social or political issue or group, they frequently use more complex arguments and more subtle tactics than bluntly manipulative documentaries.

Since World War II, political documentaries have grown more varied and occasionally more militant. In 1968, Argentine filmmakers Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino produced *The Hour of the Furnaces,* a three-hour-long examination of the colonial exploitation of Argentina's culture and resources that inspired heated political discussions and even demonstrations in the street. In recent decades, feminist documentaries, gay and lesbian documentaries, and documentaries about race have explored political issues and identities that traditionally have not been addressed. The variety of these films indicates the power and purpose of this tradition. *American Revolutionary: The Evolution of Grace Lee Boggs* (2013) examines the life and work of a Detroit activist who continued, at age ninety-seven, to work for social change at a grassroots level. Robert Epstein and Richard Schmiechen's *The Times of Harvey Milk* (1984) describes the assassinations of San Francisco mayor George Moscone and Harvey Milk, an activist who was the first gay supervisor elected in the city, and Jennie Livingston's *Paris Is*

Burning (1990) documents the Harlem drag ball scene **[Figure 8.28]**. Spike Lee's HBO documentary *When the Levees Broke: A Requiem in Four Acts* (2006), about the U.S. government's mishandling of the 2005 Hurricane Katrina disaster, is a worthy heir to a long tradition of documentaries that make the politics of race the centerpiece of the politics of the nation **[Figure 8.29]**.

8.28 ***Paris Is Burning*** (1990). A sympathetic and witty portrayal of the subculture of drag balls in New York City.

8.29 ***When the Levees Broke: A Requiem in Four Acts*** (2006). Spike Lee's HBO documentary uses the medium as a powerful tool for political statements.

Indigenous Cinema

Indigenous cinema involves direct representation of native cultures and their ability to assert power through the control of the image. The relatively recent introduction of video technology to indigenous people, such as the Kayapo and Waipai people in the Amazon Basin of Brazil, has resulted in considerable output that has several empowering social uses **[Figure 8.30]**. These include the preservation of traditional culture for future generations, activism for land rights and the environment, and a new form of visual expression in a culture that has traditionally relied on pictorial communication. Although the Kayapo are entering a new historical

moment by employing this technology, the primary purpose of their films is to preserve the past.

Courtesy of Documentary Educational Resources from the Video in the Villages Series by Vincent Carelli

8.30 ***The Spirit of TV*** (1990). Native peoples of the Amazon, such as the Waipai, have used video to record their culture and assert their rights.

HISTORY CLOSE UP

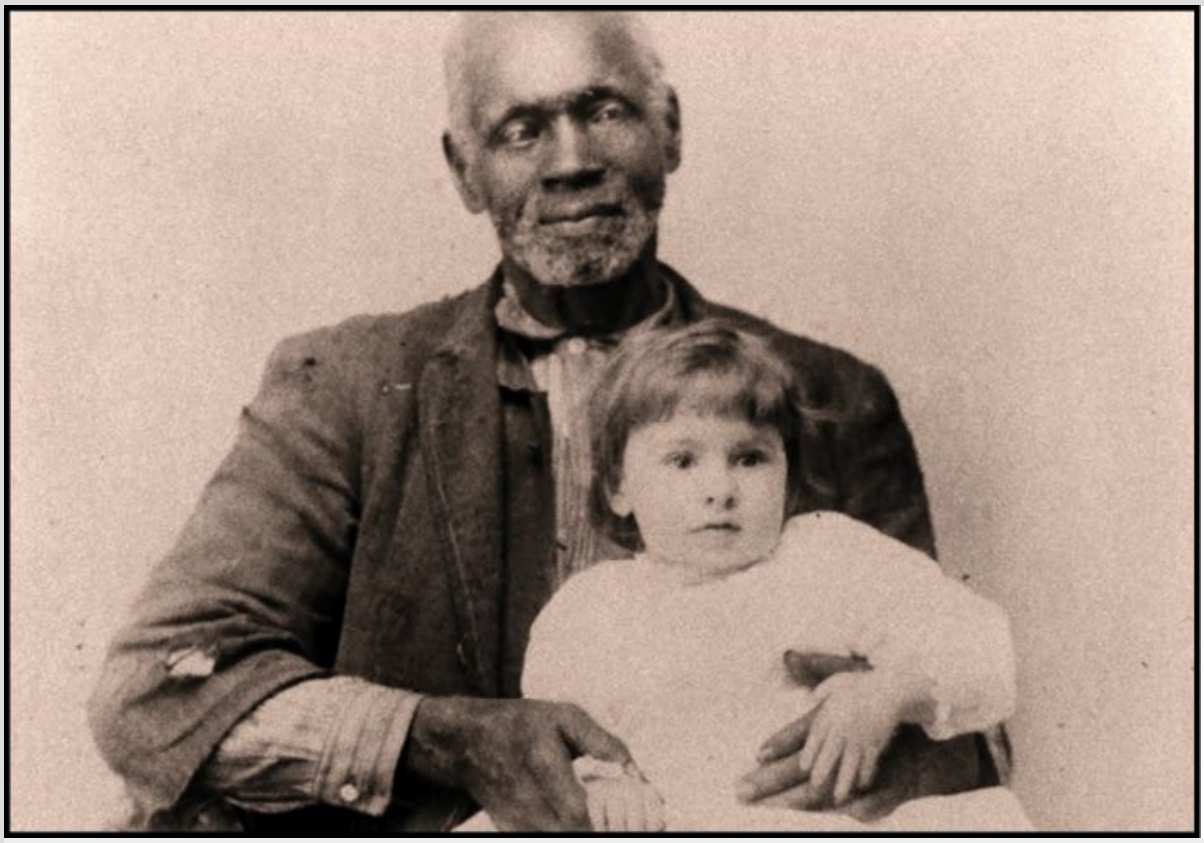
Indigenous Media

Like the Kayapo and Waipai people (see Indigenous Cinema, above), the indigenous people of Canada also left behind their legacy as objects of ethnographic film and campaigned for self-representation. Organized activism resulted in the licensing of the Inuit Broadcasting Network in 1982, featuring programming by, for, and about native Canadians. Years later, a new phase of indigenous media making was marked by the historic release of *Atanarjuat: The Fast Runner* (2001, right). Shot in digital video, this extraordinary film, directed by Inuit filmmaker Zacharias Kunuk, deploys the genre of epic to explore a people's past. But it portrays a cultural legend, not a factual past. Although at first it resembles an ethnographic film, *Atanarjuat* is set a millennium ago. By setting its depiction of the traditional way of life in the mythic past, the film represents an Inuit claim to self-representation on several levels. The film's use of amateur actors lends an "authenticity" to the scripted scenes, and its script represents the longest text ever written in the Inuit language. Its images also implicitly acknowledge and respond to the beauty as well as the problems of ethnographic documentaries by nonindigenous filmmakers like *Nanook of the North* (1922). Two subsequent films made in 2006 and 2009 complete the *Fast Runner* trilogy.

The Historical Documentary Tradition

Another form related to social documentary is the **historical documentary**, a type of film that concentrates largely on recovering and representing events or figures in history. Depending on the topic, these films are often compilations of materials, relying on old film footage or other materials such as letters, testimonials by historians, or photographs. Whatever the materials and tactics, however, historical documentaries have moved in two broad directions.

Conventional documentary histories assume that the facts and realities of a past history can be more or less recovered and accurately represented. *The Atomic Cafe* (1982), although a rather satirical documentary, uses media and government footage to describe the paranoia and hysteria of the nuclear arms race during the Cold War. The films of Ken Burns — including the PBS series *The Civil War* (1990), *Baseball* (1996), and *The War* (2007) — use a range of materials, techniques, and voices to re-create the layered dynamics of major historical and cultural events **[Figure 8.31]**.



8.31 ***The Civil War*** (1990). By employing archival footage, including letters written by soldiers, Ken Burns's epic film unveils the human pathos and triumphs of the American Civil War.

Reflexive documentary histories, in contrast, adopt a dual point of view. Alongside the work to describe an event (such as a historical trauma like the Holocaust or the nuclear bombing of Hiroshima) is the awareness that film or other discourses and materials will never be able to retrieve the full reality of that lost history. Despite their vastly different topics (the Nazi death camps and the racist murder of a Chinese American automotive engineer), Claude Lanzmann's *Shoah* (1985) and Christine Choy and Renee Tajima's *Who Killed Vincent Chin?* (1987) engage specific historical and cultural atrocities

and simultaneously reflect on the difficulty, if not impossibility, of fully and accurately documenting the truth of those events and experiences [Figure 8.32].

Courtesy of Filmakers Library, an imprint of Alexander Street Press

8.32 ***Who Killed Vincent Chin?*** (1987). This film documents a local hate crime that resonates in larger historical terms. At the same time, it reflects on the difficulty of communicating the full historical truth.

The Ethnographic Documentary Tradition

Ethnographic films, which record the practices, rituals, and people of a culture, have roots in early cinema and are a third major tradition in documentary film. Ethnographic films are typically about cultural revelations and present specific peoples, rituals, or

communities that may have been marginalized by or invisible to the mainstream culture.

Anthropological films are a type of ethnographic film that explore different global cultures and peoples, both living and extinct. In the first part of the twentieth century, these films often sought out communities that were endangered or little known to contemporary U.S. and European audiences. Such documentaries generally aim to reveal cultures and peoples authentically, but in fact they often are implicitly shaped by the perspectives of the filmmakers and often impose filmmakers' interpretations. One such film is Robert Flaherty's *Nanook of the North* (1922), widely considered the first feature-length documentary film and one of the most influential films of all time. This film is a record of the lives and customs of the Inuit people of the Canadian Arctic. While Flaherty's portrayal of the indigenous people is generally sympathetic, he staged or fictionalized some scenes for the film, blurring the boundaries between truth and fiction. Shortly afterward, Ernest B. Schoedsack and Merian C. Cooper made *Grass* (1925), a record of an Iranian migration (and in 1933, they made the not unrelated feature film *King Kong*). In the 1940s and 1950s, such works as Jean Rouch's *The Magicians of Wanzerbe* (1949) transformed film into an extension of anthropology, searching out the social rituals and cultural habits that distinguish the people of particular societies. Robert Gardner's *Dead Birds* (1965) examines the war rituals of the Dani tribe in New Guinea, maintaining a scientific distance as the filmmaker attempts

to draw out what he believes to be unique and different about the people [Figure 8.33].

Courtesy of Documentary Educational Resources from DEAD BIRDS by Robert Gardner

8.33 ***Dead Birds*** (1965). This remarkable ethnographic film provides audiences with a glimpse of life in the Dani tribe in New Guinea, focusing on Weyak, a farmer and warrior, and Pua, a young swineherd.

Nowhere do claims of film as an impartial record become more loaded than in the filming of indigenous people by outside observers. Deploying a technology like the movies means claiming the power to represent others and their history. The camera conveys a profound feeling of presence that also puts the viewer in the place of the observer or "expert." Yet throughout film history, the vast majority of anthropological films have been made by filmmakers

who come from outside the culture that is being filmed. Therefore, even when filmmakers have good intentions, the portrayal of indigenous people in such films is often misleading, inaccurate, or unrepresentative of the culture's actual customs, traditions, and values.

The scope and subject matter of anthropological films have expanded considerably over the years. This contemporary revision of anthropological cinema investigates the rituals, values, and social patterns of families or subcultures, such as the skateboard clan of *Dogtown and Z-Boys* (2001). Using found footage and archival prints of home movies made before 1950, Karen Shopsowitz's *My Father's Camera* (2001) argues that reality is sometimes best revealed by amateur filmmakers capturing everyday life though home movies and snapshots. One of the most ambitious films in movie history, Chris Marker's *Sans soleil* (*Sunless*) (1983) shuffles and experiments with many of the structures and tropes of ethnographic documentaries, following a cameraman's letters as he travels between Japan and Africa or, as the film puts it, between "the two extreme poles of survival."

Another important documentary school that is deeply connected with ethnographic cinema is *cinéma vérité* (French for "cinema truth"), as well as its North American equivalent, *direct cinema*. For more information about these interconnected traditions, see 1950s–

1970s: New Technologies and the Arrival of Television earlier in this chapter.

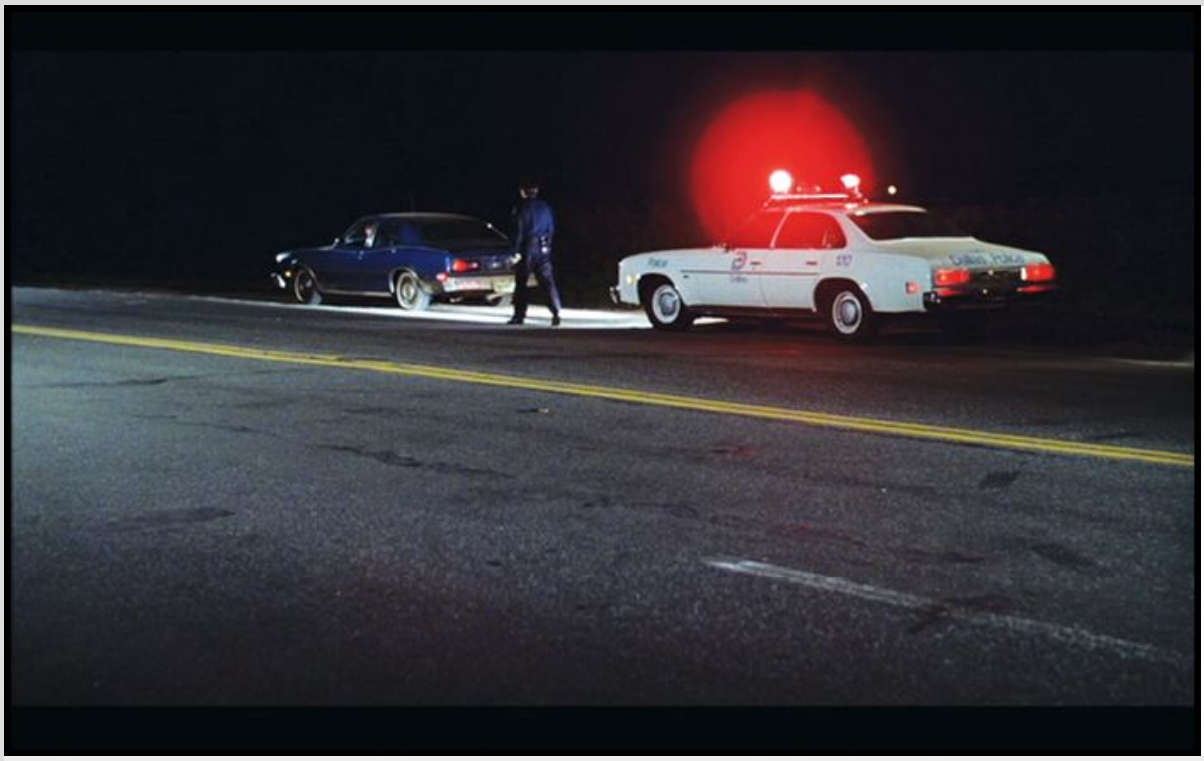
The Personal Documentary Tradition

As the line between social documentaries and ethnographic films has wavered and as filmmaking equipment becomes more widely available, **personal documentaries** (also known as *subjective documentaries*) — documentary formats that emphasize the personal perspective or involvement of the filmmaker, often making the films resemble autobiographies or diaries — have become more common. This subgenre has roots in earlier films. In *Lost, Lost, Lost* (1976), Jonas Mekas portrays his fears and hopes in a diary film about his growing up as an immigrant in New York and uses home movies, journal entries, and a fragmented style that resembles a diary. The rhythmic interjections of the commentator-poet express feelings ranging from angst to delight. In *A Healthy Baby Girl* (1996), filmmaker Judith Helfland explores the causes of her cancer diagnosis in her mother's use during pregnancy of the drug diethylstilbestrol (DES), which was prescribed to prevent miscarriage. Although the film exposes and indicts this breach of medical ethics and its effects on women's health, its primary focus is on the personal journey of the filmmaker and her family **[Figure 8.34]**.

8.34 ***A Healthy Baby Girl*** (1996). Some documentaries, such as this one about the filmmaker and her mother, entwine a personal story with larger issues — here a breach of medical ethics.

Questions about truth and honesty have shadowed documentaries since Flaherty's reconstruction of "typical" events for the camera in *Nanook of the North* (1922) and his other films in the 1920s. Documentary **reenactments**, which re-create presumably real

events within the context of a documentary, are often found in personal documentaries, too. For example, Errol Morris's *The Thin Blue Line* (1988) is a documentary about Randall Adams, a man wrongly convicted of killing a Dallas police officer in 1976, but it also becomes a mystery drama about discovering the real murderer. Although it uses the many expository techniques of documentary film, such as close-ups of evidence and talking-head interviews, *The Thin Blue Line* alternates these with staged reenactments of the murder evening, invented dialogue, an eerie Philip Glass soundtrack, courtroom drawings, and even clips from old movies **[Figure 8.35]**. The debates and questions surrounding the practice of reenactment are explored in *Manufacturing Dissent: Uncovering Michael Moore* (2007), Rick Caine and Debbie Melnyk's documentary on Michael Moore's use of reenactments in his films.



8.35 ***The Thin Blue Line*** (1988). Reenacting a crime as a part of a documentary investigation, Errol Morris's film set the stage for more experimental documentary formats.

At the other end of the spectrum, **mockumentaries** — films that use a documentary style and structure to present and stage fictional (sometimes ludicrous) subjects — take a humorous approach to the question of truth and fact. The mockumentary is an extreme example of how documentaries can generate different experiences and responses depending on viewing context and one's knowledge of the traditions and aims of such films. For example, with the initial release of *This Is Spinal Tap* (1984), some viewers saw and understood it as a straightforward rock-music documentary (or "rockumentary"), while most recognized it as a spoof on that documentary tradition **[Figure 8.36]**. The popular and controversial

Borat (2006) integrates a similar mockumentary style by following a fictional Kazakh television talking head as he travels "the greatest country in the world" in search of celebrities, cowboys, and the "cultural learning" found on the streets of America. Actor Sacha Baron Cohen mixes his impersonation of the character Borat with interviews of people who accept his persona as genuine. As such, the film raises questions about the boundary between a parody of viewers' assumptions about the truth and a dangerous distortion of the integrity of documentary values [Figure 8.37].

8.36 ***This Is Spinal Tap*** (1984). Mockumentaries like this cult film remind us that the authenticity of cinematic documentaries relies on the experiences and expectations of their audiences.

8.37 ***Borat*** (2006). Some of the most important assumptions about documentary integrity are violated in this film, perhaps as a way to satirize the pretensions of those assumptions.

Closely related to the mockumentary but with more serious aims is the fake documentary, a tradition that includes Luis Buñuel's *Land Without Bread* (1933) and Orson Welles's *F for Fake* (1974), a movie that looks at real charlatans and forgers while itself questioning the possibilities of documentary truth. A more recent film, Cheryl Dunye's *The Watermelon Woman* (1996), is a fictional account of an African American lesbian documentary filmmaker researching a black actress from the 1930s. The archive of photos and film footage she assembles for the fake documentary within the film represents a lovingly fabricated work by the film's creative team — an imagining of a history that has not survived **[Figure 8.38]**.

8.38 ***The Watermelon Woman*** (1996). As a serious use of a mockumentary tradition, this film suggests a history that has not survived — or perhaps not yet arrived.

As we have seen, documentary films create movie experiences markedly different from those of narrative cinema. Although some of these experiences are non-narrative portraits that envision individuals in ways quite unlike the narrative histories of the same people, others are about the truth of events. Narrative movies encourage us to enjoy, imagine, and think about our temporal and historical relationships with the world and to consider when those plots and narratives seem adequate according to our experiences. Documentary movies remind us, however, that we have many other

kinds of relationships with the world that involve us in many other insightful ways — through debate, exploration, and analysis.

TECHNOLOGY IN ACTION

Documentary Sound

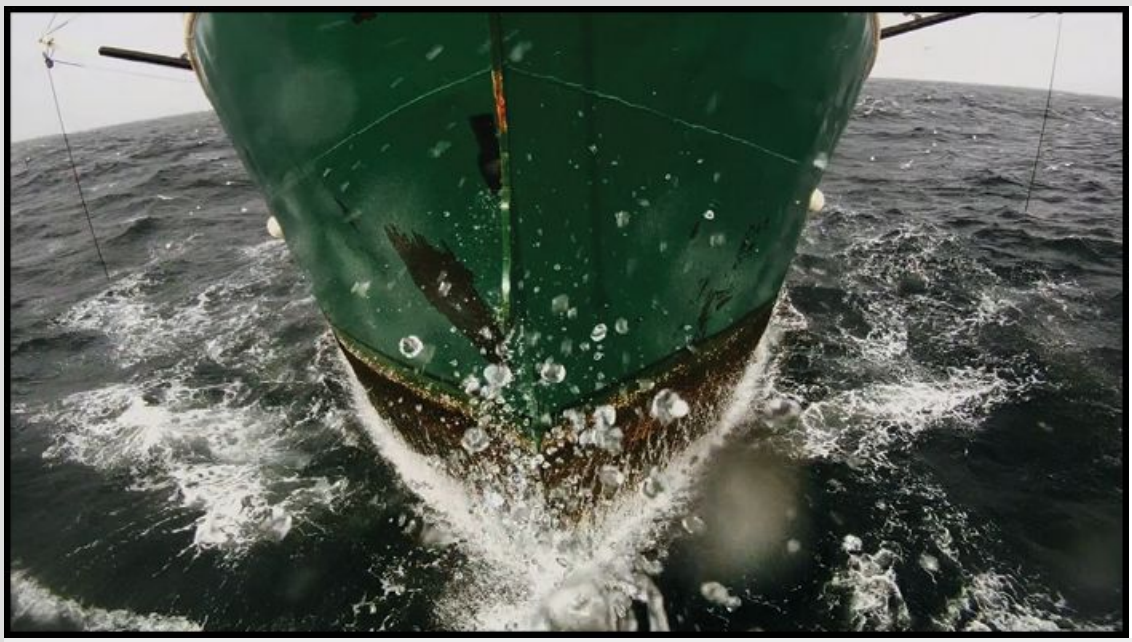
The interaction of technology and documentary cinema parallels and differs from that interaction in narrative cinema, nowhere more clearly than in how documentaries have mobilized sound technology. While synchronized, optical sound recording led to immediate changes in the formation of character and plot in narrative film, this technology had a more indirect but no less transformative impact on documentary film. Before 1927 (and to some extent after), documentaries relied on intertitles to describe locations, people, and actions. Synchronized sound recording, with its burdensome equipment, offered few advantages when filming outside the studio. Instead, most documentaries in the 1930s and 1940s would postdub soundtracks over images, providing commentary, music, or sound effects to accompany those images. The result was a tendency to infuse commentary with an authority frequently referred to as the "voice of God" that could explain and interpret unfamiliar cultures or impart a political message. A rare example of a documentary during this period that used postdubbed synchronization to counterpoint the images ironically, rather than simply to locate and explain them, was Luis Bunuel's *Land Without Bread* (1933). Here the flat, observational voiceover becomes disturbingly incapable of understanding and sympathizing with the brutal realities of an impoverished region of Spain [**Figure 8.39a**].

8.39a ***Land Without Bread*** (1933). This early documentary offers a rare use of contrapuntal voiceover that satirizes the “voice of God” narration in other documentaries.

The sound technology that altered documentary practices most obviously in the 1950s and 1960s was the introduction of the lightweight Nagra magnetic recording system. With this system, filmmakers could record sounds directly while filming, producing new directions associated with cinéma vérité in France and direct cinema in North America. In keeping with the principles of these movements, sound and images could create an interactive, unscripted immediacy, as famously evidenced in Jean Rouch and Edgar Morin’s *Chronicle of a Summer* (1961) where interviews on the streets of Paris foreground the Nagra recorders as a critical part of the documentary action **[Figure 8.39b]**.

8.39b ***Chronicle of a Summer*** (1961). The visible presence of Nagra sound recorders becomes a central part of what is being documented in interviews on the streets of Paris.

Contemporary digital technology has likewise introduced new options for sound in documentary cinema. In 2012, Dolby offered an upgraded version of Dolby surround sound called Dolby Atmos, and while this technology has been mostly aimed at 3-D narrative cinema, it has significant creative possibilities for documentaries experimenting with virtual reality (VR) filmmaking. For example, Lucien Castaing-Taylor and Verena Paravel's *Leviathan* (2012), made through the Sensory Ethnography Lab at Harvard, dramatically explored life on a large fishing vessel at sea, using sound technology to record noises and sounds under the water and on the surfaces, resulting in strange, immersive melodies and sensual audio compositions **[Figure 8.39c]**.



8.39c ***Leviathan*** (2012). The immersive possibilities of digital sound, alongside the visual images, can viscerally absorb the viewer.

Chapter 8 Review

SUMMARY

A **documentary** film is a visual and auditory representation of presumed facts, real experiences, and actual events in the world. Documentary films usually use different strategies and organizations than narrative films.

- The very first movies were nonfiction films, frequently called **actualities**: moving presentations of real people and events. Also popular during this period were other **scenics**, which depicted exotic and foreign locations, and **topicals**, which presented current events.
    - *Nanook of the North* (1922) and other anthropological films proved the commercial possibilities of the documentary format. Around the same time, Soviet filmmakers pioneered the documentary form for political purposes.
    - The introduction of **optical sound recording** in 1927 greatly affected documentary films by allowing the addition of educational or social commentary to accompany images.
    - In the 1950s, lightweight 16mm cameras and portable magnetic sound-recording equipment gave filmmakers new ways to capture reality, as exemplified by the **cinéma vérité** movement in France and **direct cinema** in North America.

    - From the 2000s on, digital video cameras and editing systems have made documentary filmmaking less expensive and technologically streamlined.
- **Nonfiction films** present presumed factual descriptions of actual events, people, or places. **Non-narrative films** are organized in a variety of ways that deemphasize stories while employing other organizational structures.
- Primary documentary traditions include the **social documentary**, the **historical documentary**, the **ethnographic film**, and the **personal documentary**.

    - *Social documentaries* examine and present peoples and cultures from a perspective that focuses on a particular problem or social issue. They include *political documentaries*.
    - *Historical documentaries* concentrate on recovering and representing events or figures in history.
    - *Ethnographic films* are cultural explorations aimed at presenting specific peoples, rituals, or communities that may have been marginalized by or are invisible to the mainstream culture. They include *anthropological films*.
    - *Personal documentaries* emphasize the personal perspective or involvement of the filmmaker. A related tradition is the **mockumentary**, which takes a humorous approach to questions of truth or fact.
    - Various types of documentaries use **reenactments** to re-create real or presumably true events.

KEY TERMS

documentary
actuality
scenic
topical
optical sound recording
propaganda film
cinéma vérité
direct cinema
activist video
shooting ratio
nonfiction film
non-narrative film
social documentary
historical documentary
ethnographic film
personal documentary
reenactment
mockumentary

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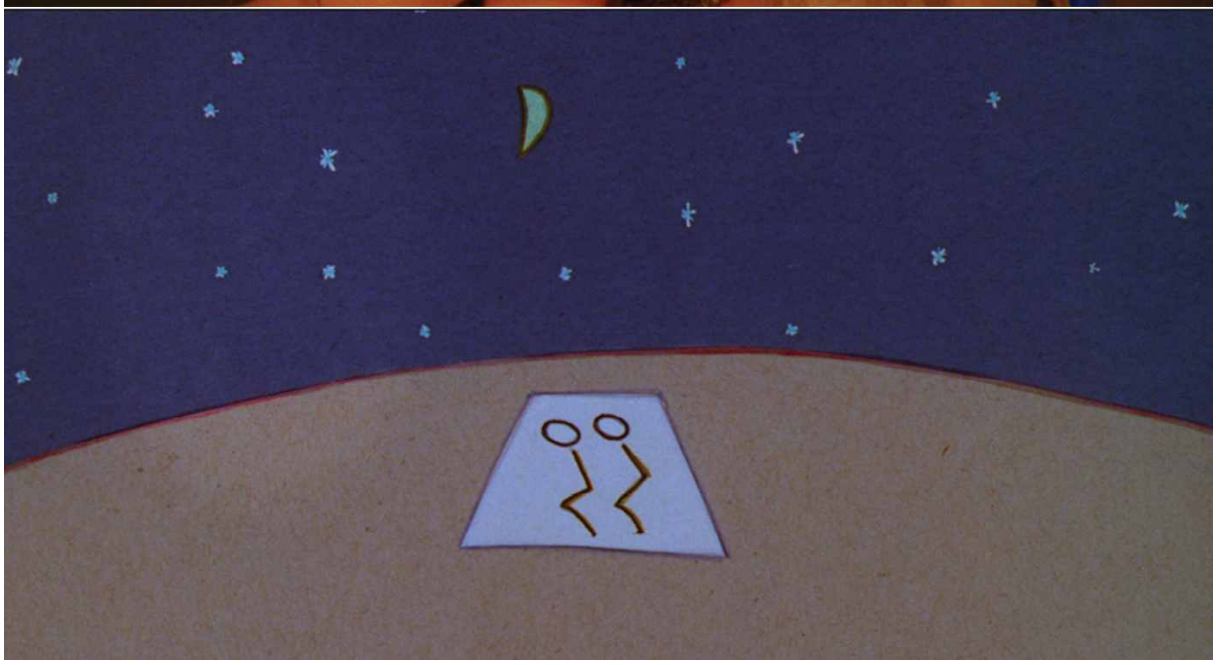
CHAPTER 9 ANIMATION AND EXPERIMENTAL MEDIA
Challenging Form



The story of a gender-nonconforming East German performer touring the American heartland, *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* (2001) is a film adaptation of the exuberant rock musical created by director and star John Cameron Mitchell with Stephen Trask. It is also a film of ideas: the intersections of identity, desire, pop culture, and creativity are explored through experimental elements including direct address to the camera, fanciful montages, and animation. The protagonist, Hedwig, has been betrayed by an American soldier, whose proposal of marriage and escape from life behind the Berlin Wall was contingent on sex reassignment surgery. The failure of the operation leaves Hedwig between sexes; her abandonment by the soldier leaves her between cultures. But Hedwig shakes off these problems in songs like “Wig in a Box.” “The Origin of Love” puts her struggles in perspective by retelling the famous mythological story from Plato’s *Symposium* about how the god Zeus prevented humans from becoming too powerful by splitting them down the middle, condemning them to search for their other halves. A captivating animated sequence depicts the original human forms — fused couples that are severed into two men, two women, or one of each — acting out the origins of love. Constantly morphing line drawings by Emily Hubley — whose parents John and Faith Hubley were also prominent animators — convey the poignance of the story and the yearning of the song. Taking off from the predictable patterns of realist narrative film, *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* uses music, color, and narration to achieve a fable-like quality. Intimacy with the audience is enhanced by the use of animation to represent the richness of the imagination.

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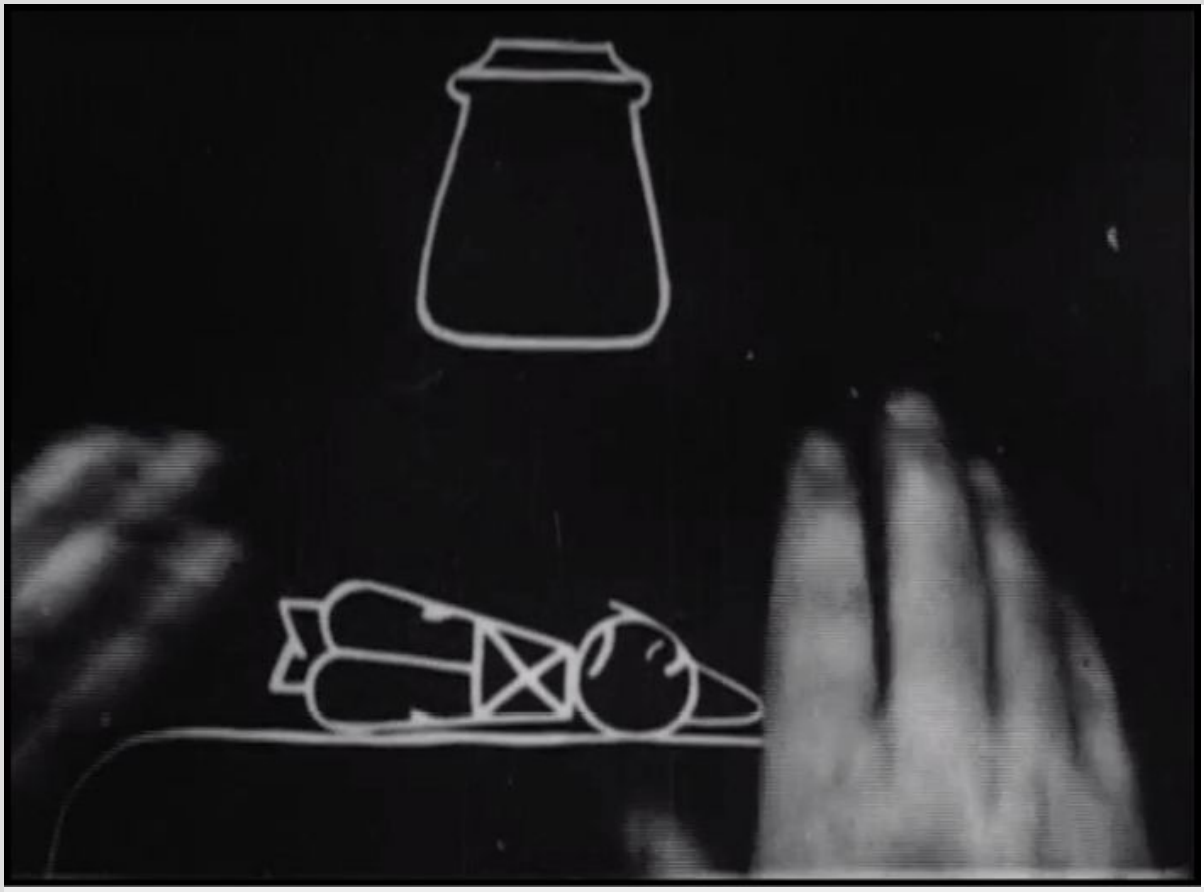
The word *cinema* is derived from *kinema*, the Greek word for "movement." Arguably, neither the storytelling ability of the medium nor its capacity to reveal the world is as basic to cinema as is the simple rendering of movement. Narrative film defines the commercial industry and much of viewers' experience of the movies; documentary film builds on viewers' assumptions about the camera's truth-telling function; and animation and experimental film focus on the basic properties of film as images in motion. **Animation** is the use of cinema technology to give the illusion of movement to successive drawings, paintings, figures, or computer-generated images. **Experimental media** include noncommercial, often non-narrative films, analog and digital video, installations, and computer-based media that use elements of form and structure for aesthetic expression. Experimental films are also referred to as **avant-garde films**; the term *avant-garde* is derived from the military term for the group that goes in advance of the rest. This text uses the more general term *experimental* to encompass uses of film and media form for aesthetic expression or technical innovation that may not be tied to specific avant-garde movements.

Throughout film history, filmmakers have used the medium to go outside the bounds of traditional narrative and documentary forms, creating and combining images and sounds of the mundane, the

unusual, and even the bizarre in order to address and challenge their audiences in fascinating ways. Often these experiments engage with medium and form in ways that comment on and bridge technological changes. For example, beginning in the late 1960s, artists used the new format of video to create **video art** for installations and gallery exhibitions. Over the last several decades, **new media** technologies — including the internet, video games, mobile media, and virtual and augmented reality — have supported the imaginative creations of artists. This chapter explores animation and experimental audiovisual media from the origins of cinema to the present day, giving you the tools to watch and discuss some of screen history's most beloved — and some of its most challenging — endeavors.

Animation builds on a basic element of film form: the combination of a series of still images to produce the illusion of movement. The delightful transformations of the line figures in Émile Cohl's 1908 *Fantasmagorie*, one of the earliest animated films, illustrate this principle **[Figure 9.1]**. Meanwhile, experimental films intentionally reflect on the properties of the medium and the conditions in which it is experienced by audiences. These include basic elements like film stock, light, duration, editing patterns, and projection before an audience. Paul Sharits's 1966 *Ray Gun Virus* makes the mechanism behind the illusion of motion visible through the strobing effect of an irregular sequence of color fields. Changes in technology bring changes in the forms and objects of these reflections. Video artist

Joan Jonas sets a video monitor to display a rolling image as an exploration of the medium of television in *Vertical Roll* (1972) **[Figure 9.2]**. All three works are based on the way discrete images combine in moving image media.



9.1 ***Fantasmagorie*** (1908). One of the earliest cartoons, made for Gaumont Studios by Émile Cohl, animates the negative images of hundreds of drawings on paper. The title alludes to precinematic optical entertainment and reveries in which figures undergo unexpected transformation.

Image copyright of the artist, courtesy of Video Data Bank, www.vdb.org, School of the Art Institute of Chicago.

9.2 ***Vertical Roll*** (1972). Video artist Joan Jonas's piece takes its name from a television malfunction in which the unstable video image appears to roll. Here her face appears as if trapped in the monitor.

Animation and experimental media are two distinct alternatives to live-action mainstream film that also have significant points of convergence. As this chapter highlights, many experimental filmmakers and new media artists throughout film history have used animation in their explorations. And animation and experimental media are also linked theoretically. New media theorist Lev Manovich argues that the advent of digital cinema challenges the long-standing assumption that recording reality is the primary aim of cinema, restoring the primacy of animation and its experimental

possibilities to film history. But animation and experimental media can differ widely in relation to the commercial film industry and to narrative form. Animated narrative films represent a significant share of the global film market, and the digital techniques used in contemporary computer animation pervade almost all studio-produced cinema. Experimental media is often non-narrative and made by individual artists rather than by large crews or studios to circulate outside the commercial entertainment sector. This chapter combines discussion of these forms where it is illuminating and considers them separately when indicated.

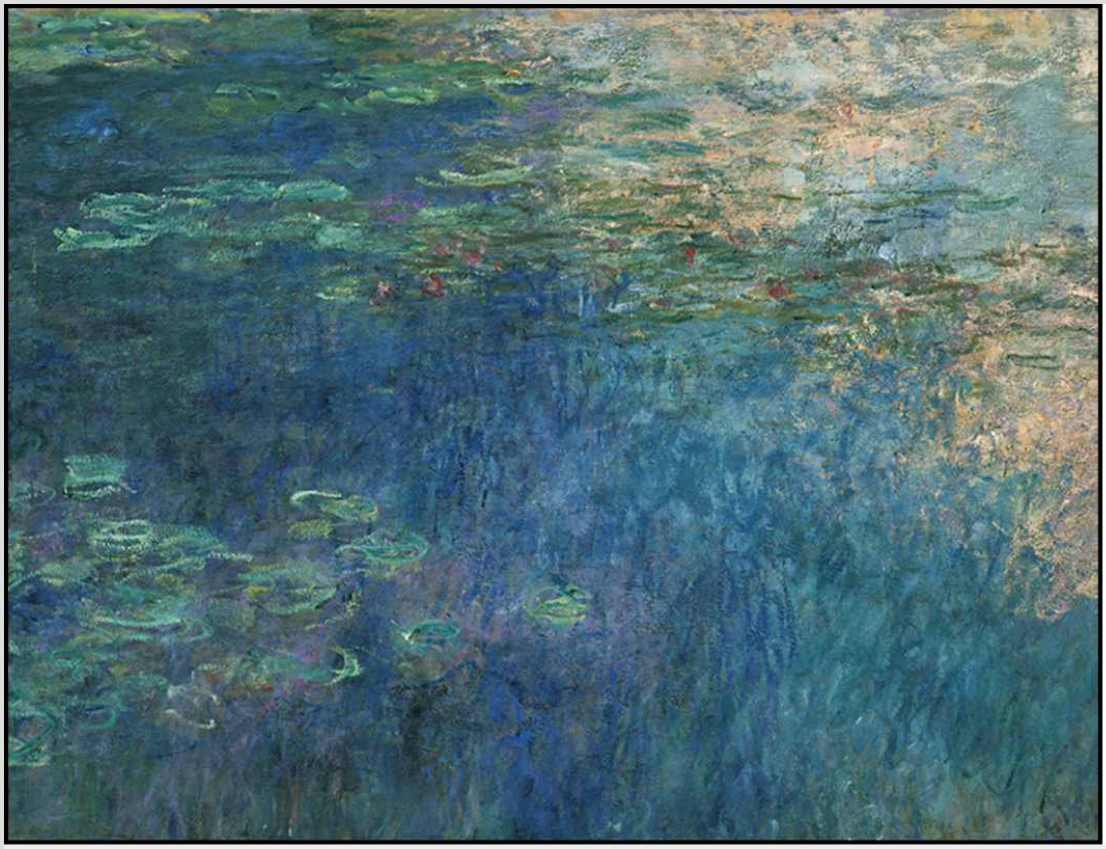
KEY OBJECTIVES

- Describe animation and experimental film and media as cultural practices.
- Explain how animated and experimental works draw on broader aesthetic histories.
- Point out how these works explore the formal properties of their media.
- Discuss how animated and experimental media can both challenge and become part of dominant film forms and institutions.
- Explain various modes of traditional and computer animation.
- Examine some of the common organizations, styles, and perspectives in experimental media.
- Prepare viewers to watch and appreciate experimental works.
- Explain dimensions of the film experience made possible by animation and experimental media.

A Short History of Animation and Experimental Media

Animated and experimental media and the vision they express have roots in the wider technological and social changes associated with **modernity**, a term designating the period of history from the end of the medieval era to the present as well as the period's attitude of confidence in progress and science centered on the human capacity to shape history.

As modern society embraced progress and knowledge, some individuals rejected the scientific and utilitarian bias of the quest for facts. In "A Defence of Poetry" (1819), Romantic poet Percy Bysshe Shelley proclaimed that poets were the unacknowledged legislators of the world. Walter Pater, in *The Renaissance* (1873), argued for the power of art to reveal the importance of the human imagination and create experiences unavailable in commerce and science. Pre-Raphaelite paintings like those of Dante Gabriel Rossetti and the glimmering Impressionist paintings of Claude Monet expressed aesthetic commitments to sensibility, creativity, and perception over factual observation **[Figure 9.3]**. Romantic aesthetic traditions later influenced the emphasis on individual expressivity that is central to much experimental film practice **[Figure 9.4]**.



Monet, Claude (1840-1926). Water Lilies. 1914-26. Oil on canvas, three panels, each 69 6 3/40 x 139 11 1/40 (200 x 424.8 cm), overall 69 6 3/40 x 419 10 3/80 (200 x 1276 cm). Mrs. Simon Guggenheim Fund. (666.1959.a-c) The Museum of Modern Art, New York, NY U.S.A. Digital Image © The Museum of Modern Art/Licensed by SCALA/Art Resource, NY

9.3 Claude Monet, *Water Lilies* (c. 1916–1920). This panel from Monet's triptych anticipated experimental film in its energetic depiction of light.

9.4 ***The Garden of Earthly Delights*** (1981). The work of prolific experimental filmmaker Stan Brakhage is indebted to nineteenth-century Romanticism and its conception of artistic insight. This two-minute film was made by pressing flowers and leaves between strips of film and optically printing the images.

At the same time, the rapid industrial and cultural changes of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were mirrored and questioned in developments in the arts. Printing processes in the nineteenth century expanded the use of illustration, both graphic and photographic. Modernist forms of painting, music, graphic and industrial design, and architecture captured new experiences of time, space, and fragmentation enabled by technologies like the

railroad, the telegraph, and electricity. Cubist and Futurist painting broke down shapes and movements into constituent parts, modes reflected in animation techniques. Cinema attracted experimental artists from other media and was considered a central art of modernism.

1910s–1920s: Early Avant-Garde Movements

In the silent film era, animation contributed to the showmanship of early filmmakers like Georges Méliès and Windsor McCay. McCay's endearing animated figure Gertie the Dinosaur performed tricks in his vaudeville act before being featured in a 1914 cartoon. Meanwhile, experimental film practices and movements linked to other innovations in art emerged in a number of countries. In Germany in the 1920s, Dada artists Hans Richter and Viking Eggeling began animated experiments in abstraction that they called **absolute film** **[Figure 9.5]**, and expressionist painters in the group Der Sturm worked on the set designs of *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1920). In 1920s France, avant-garde filmmakers such as Jean Epstein and Germaine Dulac drew on impressionism in painting as well as new musical forms in their work. At the same time, film artists explored cinematography and editing to develop the cinema as a unique art form. In *Ballet mécanique* (1924), French cubist painter Fernand Léger collaborated with American director Dudley Murphy in a celebration of machine-age aesthetics originally intended as a

visual accompaniment to American composer George Antheil's musical piece of the same name. This influential film blurs the distinction between animation and live action, combining drawing (an animated Charlie Chaplin, for example) and rhythmic editing that animates photographed objects, like the legs of a mannikin that seem to dance **[Figure 9.6]**.

A still from the experimental film, Rhythmus, shows an abstract footage of horizontal and vertical white bars against a dark background.

9.5 ***Rhythmus 21*** (1921). German artist Hans Richter claimed that this exploration of shapes in motion was the first abstract film.

A still from the film, Ballet mécanique, shows an animated image of Charlie Chaplin.

9.6 ***Ballet mécanique*** (1924). Charlie Chaplin's iconic image is animated by Fernand Léger.

VIEWING CUE

What historical precedents in the arts might have shaped the strategies used in the film you just viewed? Does aligning the film with a historical precedent shed light on its aims? Explain.

Animated and avant-garde filmmaking in the silent era were international in spirit, with filmmakers paying tribute to the modern metropolis in the "city symphony" genre. Charles Sheeler and photographer Paul Strand document New York City scenes in *Manhatta* (1921). Filmic impressions of Berlin are orchestrated in Walter Ruttmann's *Berlin: Symphony of a Great City* (1927), and Dziga Vertov's *Man with a Movie Camera* (1929) shows the dynamism of modern Soviet life. In Britain, internationalism was advocated by writers and artists Kenneth Macpherson, Bryher, and the American poet H.D. through their translation of writings by Soviet filmmaker Sergei Eisenstein in their journal *Close Up* and in their strange and unique film, *Borderline* (1930). Featuring the politically outspoken African American actor Paul Robeson and his wife, Eslanda, *Borderline* engaged themes of race, sexuality, and Freudian psychoanalysis **[Figure 9.7]**. Lotte Reiniger completed one of the first feature-length animated films, *The Adventures of Prince Achmed*, in 1926, using a frame-by-frame technique manipulating intricate silhouetted cut-outs **[Figure 9.8]**.

A still from the experimental narrative, Borderline, shows Paul Robeson decorating himself with flowers and leaves.

9.7 *Borderline* (1930). The editors of the British film journal *Close Up* put their modernist ideas into practice in this experimental narrative featuring the American actor Paul Robeson.

A silhouette used for the film, The Adventures of Prince Achmed, shows an elaborately dressed pair of people playing chess and an attendant fanning them.

9.8 ***The Adventures of Prince Achmed*** (1926). German animator Lotte Reiniger's distinctive hand-cut paper silhouettes were used expressively in an adaptation of stories from *One Thousand and One Nights*.

1930s–1940s: Sound and Vision

The international spirit of avant-garde cinema was challenged in the 1930s by the language barriers accompanying the introduction of sound and by the rise of fascism in Europe. Although many experimental filmmakers resisted the incorporation of synchronized sound and continued to produce silent films long after sound's introduction at the end of the 1920s, some were immediately attracted to the formal possibilities of the soundtrack. Dziga Vertov's interest in radio and industrial sounds was explored in *Enthusiasm* (1931). German animator Oskar Fischinger composed abstract visual music in films such as *Allegretto* (1936), which he produced in the United States **[Figure 9.9]**. American ethnomusicologist Harry Smith produced dozens of short films to be accompanied by musical performances, records, or radio, and artist Joseph Cornell reedited a Hollywood B movie to make *Rose Hobart* (1936) and played a samba record to accompany its projection. Playwright Jean Cocteau began making his influential poetic, surrealist films in 1930 with *The Blood of a Poet*, which combines lyric imagery with music by French composer Georges Auric.

A still from the film, Allegretto, shows a multi-colored pattern of diamond shapes.

9.9 ***Allegretto*** (1936). The films of animator Oskar Fischinger are designed as visual music.

Most historians consider *Meshes of the Afternoon* (1943) by Russian-born Maya Deren and her Czech husband, Alexander Hammid, the beginning of the American avant-garde's historical prominence (see the Film in Focus feature about this film later in this chapter). Lightweight 16mm cameras, introduced as an amateur format and widely used during World War II for reportage, appealed to Deren and other mid-century artists seeking more personal film expression. The striking imagery and structure of Deren's films and her tireless advocacy for experimental film as a writer and lecturer shaped the conditions for, and aesthetics of, American "visionary film," the term coined by scholar P. Adams Sitney for this experimental film movement.

Animation had already been incorporated in commercial advertising and theatrical exhibition during the silent era. But in Walt Disney's *Steamboat Willie* (1928), animated by Ub Iwerks, Mickey Mouse came alive with the addition of sound **[Figure 9.10]**. The studio went on to use music as a defining element of its Technicolor Silly Symphony series and the experimental feature *Fantasia* (1940), which featured the work of more than one thousand artists and technicians. Most major studios also had animation divisions that produced thousands of cartoons throughout the golden age of Hollywood. Warner Bros. was particularly well known for its Merrie Melodies and Looney Tunes series, which often mocked the conventions of **live-action movies** (film using photographic images). Japanese animation, known as **anime**, was

also well established by this period; Kenzō Masaoka's short film *Chikara to Onna no Yo no Naka* (1933) was the first anime to feature audio voiceover.

A still from the animated film, Steamboat Willie, shows the cartoon character Micky Mouse steering a steamboat.

9.10 ***Steamboat Willie*** (1928). This sound cartoon's critical and commercial success established Walt Disney Productions as a powerful force in animated filmmaking.

FILM IN FOCUS Avant-Garde Visions in *Meshes of the Afternoon* (1943)

See also: *Un chien andalou* (*An Andalusian Dog*) (1929); *Scorpio Rising* (1964)

To watch a clip from *Meshes of the Afternoon* (1943), go to LaunchPad for *The Film Experience* at **launchpadworks.com**

Maya Deren and Alexander Hammid's experimental film *Meshes of the Afternoon* (1943) forged a new American avant-garde cinema, drawing from Hammid's filmmaking experiences in Europe and Deren's wide interests in poetry, dance and choreography, ritual, and psychoanalysis. Introspective and mysterious in its explorations of one woman's dream world, the film evokes symbolic associations, and its sequences invite narrative speculations.

Meshes of the Afternoon opens by juxtaposing a brightly lit exterior with an interior reality of fantasies, fears, and unarticulated feelings when a hand holding a flower reaches into a frame and abruptly disappears. A woman, played by Deren, enters a house, with some difficulty, and then falls asleep in a chair. After images of her sleeping eyes alternate with a window to the outside world, we see symbolic objects — a key, a knife — begin to take on a life of their own. A figure cloaked in black turns, revealing a mirror where a face should be, suggesting a figure of death and duality **[Figure 9.12]**. A man enters the house: a phone is off the hook, another mirror breaks into shards on a bed. Are these images external or imagined? Is the broken mirror a symbol of violence or of insight? The woman sits down at a table and is joined by two other figures of herself. Following the laws of

the imagination rather than of reality, *Meshes of the Afternoon* is a visionary exploration of a woman's consciousness that deploys symbols of the unconscious — a puzzle that never completely comes together as a clear picture.

A still from the film, Meshes of the Afternoon, shows a cloaked figure with a mirror face, holding a bunch of flowers and standing on a stone pathway.

9.12 ***Meshes of the Afternoon*** (1943). A cloaked figure seems to beckon and then recedes around the corner. The figure's face is a mirror, adding to its ambiguity.

The challenge of the film lies in the fact that narrative is not its primary organizational feature. Instead, images accumulate, repeat, and contrast in associative chains that create internal patterns. The key to the door is dropped, reappears in the woman's hand, then disappears **[Figure 9.13]**. The key suggests interpretation, but no interpretation is definitive. The knife is associated with domesticity when used to cut bread, but it also may perpetrate domestic violence when the woman appears to be dead on a bed, and it may be the instrument of self-inflicted violence when she approaches her double with knife in hand.

A still from the film, Meshes of the Afternoon, shows an open palm holding a key.

9.13 ***Meshes of the Afternoon*** (1943). The central image of the key suggests the viewer's search for the key that will unlock the film's meaning.

The window, which represents the border between inside and outside, functions as a metaphor for the film frame **[Figure 9.14]**. As the woman who looks out of the window is played by Deren herself, *Meshes of the Afternoon* could be said to enact a woman's desires, fears, and struggles to escape domestic confinement. When the woman approaches her sleeping double with the dagger in her hand, each of the five different steps she takes is placed in a space that moves from outside to inside — one step by the ocean, another on the earth, the next on grass, the fourth on the pavement outside the house, and the last on the rug inside the room. Interior and exterior are explored psychologically — drawing on women's association with the home and on film genres such as gothic melodramas that render the domestic sphere threatening.

A still from the film, Meshes of the Afternoon, shows Maya Deren looking out from a glass window.

9.14 ***Meshes of the Afternoon*** (1943). Maya Deren looking out from the window has become an iconic image of this avant-garde exploration of women's subjectivity.

Meshes of the Afternoon infuses the emerging American avant-garde cinema with a deeply personal passion that Deren brought to her filmmaking, teaching, and writing. Like William Blake's illustrated poems about the dark side of the imagination or Odilon Redon's pictorial voyages into the subconscious, Deren's film aims to transform reality through the power of the imagination. As individually expressive as the film is, however, it also subtly shows a critical perspective on conventional film traditions. After the film's title appear the words "Hollywood 1943." Made within miles of the film studios often referred to as the "dream factory," *Meshes of the Afternoon* left the industrial tradition behind to pursue a dream of film as art.

1950s–1960s: International Animation and the Postwar American Avant-Garde

World War II and the postwar decades saw a proliferation of animation and experimental filmmaking across the globe. During the war, the National Film Board of Canada set up its animation studio under the direction of Norman McLaren, who made the country a legendary force in postwar animation. Japan continued to innovate, releasing its first anime feature in color, *Hakujaden* (1958). Czech animation received worldwide acclaim with the puppet films of Jiří Trnka, including 1959's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* **[Figure 9.11]**. Disney began expanding into live-action film, television, and theme parks, but it remained the dominant studio in the production of animated features, including *Sleeping Beauty* (1959).

9.11 ***A Midsummer Night's Dream*** (1959). Director, illustrator, and puppetmaster Jiří Trnka used intricately crafted puppets and backgrounds to re-create the fantastical characters of Shakespeare's comedy.

HISTORY CLOSE UP

Floyd Norman

Animator Floyd Norman has worked in Hollywood since the 1950s, on films from Disney classics like *Sleeping Beauty* (1959) to Pixar computer-animated films like *Monsters, Inc*. (2001). He has also worked on well-known TV cartoons like Hanna-Barbera's *The Smurfs* (1981–1990) and *Alvin and the Chipmunks* (1983–1990). His numerous and varied credits attest to the vast teams and talents that go into traditional and digital animation processes: he has worked as what is called an "inbetweener," a layout artist, a storyboard artist, and a story editor.

Stefanie Keenan/Getty Images Entertainment/Getty Images

Norman's work behind the scenes is important to Hollywood history in another way: he was the first African American animator on staff at Disney, a pioneer in an industry that was and remains lacking in diversity. Born in 1935 in Santa Barbara, California, Norman grew up passionate about drawing and did not regard race as a barrier to entering his chosen profession. He came to Disney in 1956 with a diverse group of young artists and worked alongside Walt Disney himself on the latter's final film, *The Jungle Book* (1967). Interested in creating images for and about African American children, he and a partner founded an animation studio, working on the animated special *Hey, Hey, Hey, It's Fat Albert* (1969) and later establishing the website Afrokids.com. Norman found a place in the new world of computer animation on *Toy Story 2* (1999) and, valuing the camaraderie of the studio production process, remains a fixture at Walt Disney Studios even after retirement.

Recent documentaries — like *Floyd Norman: An Animated Life* (Michael Fiore and Erik Sharkey, 2016) and *Tyrus* (Pamela Tom, 2015) on Chinese American artist Tyrus Wong, an unsung background artist on Disney's *Bambi* (1942) — encourage viewers to look beyond the onscreen image to mine the richness of buried Hollywood histories.

The postwar period also saw the flourishing of the American avant-garde movement. Stan Brakhage was its most significant contributor, making four hundred 16mm and 8mm films, mostly silent, in a career spanning almost half a century. Although most of his films arrange imagery in sensual, abstract patterns, they also include very personal subject matter. Intimate images of his wife Jane giving birth are featured in *Window Water Baby Moving* (1959). Working with the film stock itself — painting, scratching, and even taping moth wings to celluloid in *Mothlight* (1963), techniques sometimes called direct or cameraless animation — Brakhage emphasized the materiality of film and the direct creative process of the filmmaker.

The American experimental film community established its own alternative exhibition circuit, including New York's Cinema 16 and the Anthology Film Archives (cofounded in 1969 by filmmaker Jonas Mekas), as well as distribution cooperatives such as the FilmMakers' Cooperative and Canyon Cinema. The exchanges fostered among artists and audiences profoundly influenced later generations of filmmakers working with film as personal expression. The countercultural impulses of many post–World War II U.S.

filmmakers were reflected in their preferred term **underground film** — nonmainstream film associated particularly with the experimental film culture of 1960s and 1970s New York and San Francisco. In New York, pop artist Andy Warhol definitively shaped the underground film movement. He explored the properties of cinema as a time-based medium in his eight-hour view of the Empire State Building, *Empire* (1964), the five-hour *Sleep* (1963), and other films. He also created his own version of the Hollywood studio system at the Factory, whose "superstars" — underground male and female devotees of glamour such as Viva, Mario Montez, and Holly Woodlawn — were featured in films he either directed or produced, including *Chelsea Girls* (1966) and *Flesh* (1968), respectively **[Figure 9.15]**. A legendary figure in this gay underground film scene, New York filmmaker Jack Smith incorporated his sublime and campy films and slides into erratically timed live performances in his downtown loft. In one notorious incident, a screening of Smith's *Flaming Creatures* (1963) was shut down by the police for the film's provocative content **[Figure 9.16]**.

9.15 ***Chelsea Girls*** (1966). The singer and Warhol “superstar” Nico appears in this Andy Warhol and Paul Morrissey film. Composed of vignettes filmed in New York’s Chelsea Hotel, the film was projected on two screens arranged side by side.

9.16 ***Flaming Creatures*** (1963). Perhaps the most famous (and most notorious) of Jack Smith's works, this film, which featured several surreal and disturbing sex scenes, was seized by the police during its premiere and banned for being "obscene."

Maya Deren's role in the New York avant-garde also opened up space for women filmmakers. Shirley Clarke made abstract films like *Bridges-Go-Round* (1958) and the remarkable interview film *Portrait of Jason* (1967) and cofounded the influential FilmMakers' Cooperative. Yoko Ono pursued filmmaking in addition to music and other areas of artistic expression, producing the humorous *Film No. 4 (Bottoms)* (1966) and the harrowing *Rape* (1969). By the late 1960s and early 1970s, an explicitly feminist avant-garde movement

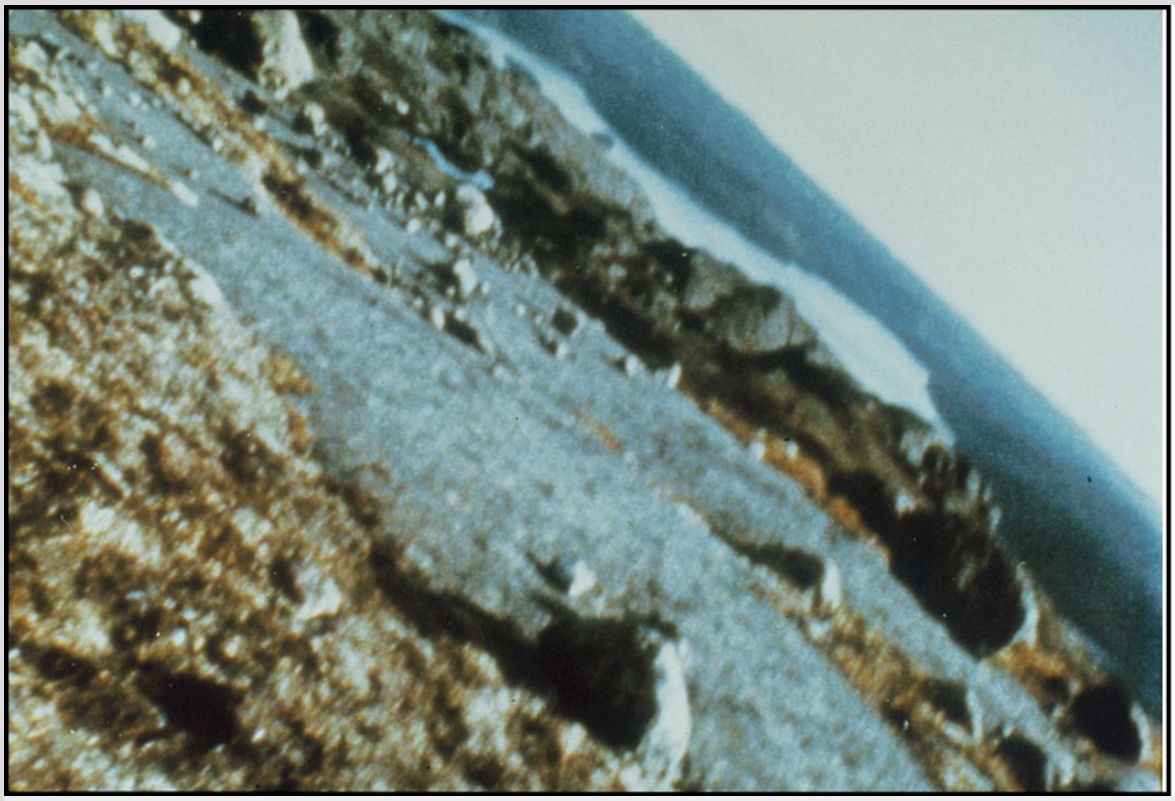
emerged with artists and filmmakers like Carolee Schneemann, who filmed herself and her husband making love in *Fuses* (1967), and Yvonne Rainer, who incorporated her work as an avant-garde dancer and choreographer, as well as experiments with language and text, in the feature-length *Film about a Woman Who* … (1974).

The underground film movement frankly explored gender and sexual politics, and the political radicalism of the late 1960s was addressed at the border between documentary and experimental practice. African American actor, independent filmmaker, and documentarian William Greaves investigated the power relations observed on a film shoot in his feature-length *Symbiopsychotaxiplasm* (1968) made in Central Park **[Figure 9.17]**.

9.17 ***Symbiopsychotaxiplasm*** (1968). A hybrid of fiction and documentary, William Greaves's film about making a film in Central Park in 1968 is a fascinating record of the counterculture.

Experimental filmmaking also flourished outside New York. San Francisco, the heart of the counterculture and gay and lesbian rights movements, hosted its own vibrant avant-garde film scene, exemplified in the work of poet and filmmaker James Broughton and the prolific lesbian experimental filmmaker Barbara Hammer. Hammer began her career in the Bay Area with short explorations of nature and the female body, such as *Multiple Orgasm* (1976), and continued to use experimental film language to explore lesbian identity, eroticism, and modes of perception in more than eighty

short films before her death in 2019. Canadian filmmaker Michael Snow explores space, time, and the capacity of the camera to transcend human perception in works identified as **structural film** — an experimental film movement that emerged in North America in the 1960s, in which films were organized around formal principles. In Snow's *La région centrale* (1971), a camera mounted on a specially built apparatus pans, swoops, and swings to provide an unprecedented view of the mountainous Quebec region named in the film's title **[Figure 9.18]**. Other significant avant-garde practitioners in Canada include Joyce Wieland, notable for films such as *Rat Life and Diet in North America* (1968), and in the next generation, Bruce Elder, whose forty-two-hour cycle of films collectively titled *The Book of All the Dead* was completed in installments from 1975 to 1994.



Courtesy of Michael Snow

9.18 ***La région centrale*** (1971). Michael Snow's 16mm camera moves wildly on a special mount, rendering the landscape abstractly through mechanized vision.

1968–1980: Beyond North America

Outside North America, experimental film impulses have often been incorporated into narrative filmmaking and theatrical exhibition rather than confined exclusively to autonomous avant-garde circles. During the postwar period in Europe, Asia, and Latin America, innovative new wave cinemas challenged and energized commercial cinemas with their visions and techniques. Such experimentation was spurred by student unrest, decolonialization and independence movements, and opposition to the American war in Vietnam.

Radical content and formal rigor characterized the films of Jean-Luc Godard and Chris Marker in France, Alexander Kluge in Germany, and Peter Wollen and Laura Mulvey in Britain. The massive traffic jam depicted in *Weekend* (1967) foregrounds Godard's revolutionary critique of consumerist culture through the consistent use of lateral tracking shots intended to hold viewers at a distance **[Figure 9.19]**. Kluge, a central figure in the New German Cinema, addressed the Nazi legacy through experimental means in films like *The Patriot* (1979), in which a history teacher literally digs for the past with a spade. Meanwhile, in *Riddles of the Sphinx*, Mulvey and Wollen developed camera techniques to avoid objectification of the female body. Other filmmakers including Chantal Akerman in Belgium, Sally Potter in England, and Marguerite Duras in France also used experimental language to explore feminist modes of expression.

9.19 *Weekend* (1967). Jean-Luc Godard's blistering critique of middle-class values is a famous example of the European avant-garde or counter cinema.

The postrevolutionary and postcolonial cinema of countries like Algeria, Cuba, and Senegal had limited means and populist intentions, prompting the use of experimental techniques in conjunction with realist filmmaking strategies. Argentine filmmakers Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino called for a **Third Cinema** (see also p. 59 in Chapter 2) in opposition to commercial and auteurist cinemas and engaged audiences directly in the ongoing revolutionary struggles in Latin America in *The Hour of the Furnaces* (1968). Cuban filmmaker Tomás Gutiérrez Alea's *Memories of Underdevelopment* (1968) uses experimental techniques such as the incorporation of documentary footage and self-reflexive voiceover in its narrative of a European-identified intellectual's sense of displacement in the aftermath of the Cuban revolution **[Figure 9.20]**.

9.20 ***Memories of Underdevelopment*** (1968). Documentary footage interrupts the musings of an alienated intellectual in postrevolutionary Cuba.

The first feature film made in sub-Saharan Africa — Ousmane Sembène's *Black Girl* (1966), about an African domestic worker's alienation in France — makes an aesthetic virtue of economic necessity, notably in its use of postsynchronized sound, which adds to our perception of the heroine's isolation. In *Perfumed Nightmare* (1978), Filipino filmmaker Kidlat Tahimik creates a witty parable of the clash between the "developed" world and the village of his birth by using a home movie aesthetic that incorporates cheap props and **found footage**, material shot for other purposes and turned to documentary or poetic use.

Global contributions to animation culture were also decisive during this period. The director of *The Great Adventure of Horus, Prince of the Sun* (1968), Isao Takahata, was recognized as an anime auteur. Hayao Miyazaki also worked as an animator on the film; the two would later found the hugely influential Studio Ghibli. The most ambitious Japanese animated production of the period was Katsuhiro Otomo's *Akira* (1988) **[Figure 9.21]**. Based on Otomo's own manga series, the film was a landmark in animation for adult audiences and introduced audiences worldwide to Japanese anime. In Italy, Bruno Bozzetto's *Allegro Non Troppo* (1976) was a parodic answer to *Fantasia*, setting classical music to a range of animated styles and responding to Disney's international dominance in the field.

9.21 ***Akira*** (1988). The most expensive anime of its era, the postapocalyptic *Akira* was enormously influential for its visuals and cyberpunk themes, opening a global market for Japanese anime.

1989–Present: New Technologies and New Media

Traditional studio animation reached perhaps its highest influence with the Disney "renaissance" of Broadway-style musicals based on well-known stories, starting with 1989's *The Little Mermaid* and continuing through to *Tarzan* (1999) a decade later. Disney partnered with Pixar Studios for its first computer-animated film, *Toy Story*, in 1995 and eventually purchased the company in 2006. With computer-generated imagery (CGI) offering unprecedented creative options and becoming more economical, traditional animation was largely displaced in studio filmmaking. The Best Animated Feature category was instituted at the Academy Awards in 2002, with the award going to DreamWorks' *Shrek* (2001), in recognition of animation's new centrality to the industry. However, the creation of a separate award category also highlights the continued struggle of animated films with being perceived — often inaccurately — as childish or culturally lesser than live-action films. With Disney, Pixar, and DreamWorks dominating the market, smaller studios and filmmakers have also continued to innovate with animated features like Sylvain Chomet's *The Triplets of Belleville*

(2003) and Marjane Satrapi and Vincent Paronnaud's adaptation of Satrapi's graphic novel of growing up in Iran, *Persepolis* (2007).

In experimental media, technology was also a major force for change during this period. Although filmmakers continued to experiment using Super 8 and 16mm (and Super 16) formats, a radical shift to use and interrogate new technologies was driven by the introduction of consumer video formats. With the Sony Portapak in the late 1960s, electronic video technology became available to artists for the first time. Video art pioneer Nam June Paik brought television into confrontation with the art world in video works that also were often works of installation art. During the 1980s, the advent of inexpensive consumer video formats spurred growth in activist videos and video art. Exemplary of both is Marlon Riggs's *Tongues Untied* (1989), a personal and poetic depiction of black gay men and HIV **[Figure 9.22]**.

9.22 *Tongues Untied* (1989). Poet Essex Hemphill appears in Marlon Riggs's *Tongues Untied*, one of the best known of the many experimental video works exploring issues of politics and identity that were facilitated by the availability of camcorders in the 1980s.

On the other end of the commercial spectrum, the launch of the MTV cable television channel in 1981 brought many previously experimental techniques — such as rapid montage, use of handheld cameras, breaking of continuity rules, and juxtaposition of different film stocks — into the mainstream, where they were quickly incorporated into commercials, television shows, and movies. Spike Jonze, for instance, developed the nonlinear narratives and

inventive visuals of his commercial and music video work in his feature film *Being John Malkovich* (1999).

In the 2000s and 2010s, music videos continued to push the boundaries between experimental and commercial filmmaking, with Beyoncé Knowles's visual album accompanying the release of *Lemonade* (2016) featuring collaborations with seven directors, poets, artists, and influencers in a sweeping statement on African American feminist politics and aesthetics.

The integration of computers and digital video in the 1990s blurred the lines between capturing on video and on film. In the independent and experimental sector of filmmaking, these media had distinct histories, cultures, and aesthetics. Commercial filmmakers used digital effects, like the credit sequence of *Se7en* (1995) that paid homage to Stan Brakhage, and video artists found new theatrical audiences for grassroots and gallery-based work by transferring it to film. At the same time, new media artists drew on mass media in computer-based work like **machinima**, which modifies videogame engines to create computer animation. The development of the internet revolutionized the potential for interactive art, allowing users to participate actively and determine their experience of the artwork. Web series became a platform for artists to explore serial form, and virtual-reality technologies allowed artist Laurie Anderson to develop the simple effect of white words on black into a many-faceted sensory and intellectual

experience in *Chalkroom* (2017, made with Hsin-Chien Huang). Perhaps most important, widespread access to computer technology has blurred the boundaries between artists and viewers, democratizing experiments with media forms and technologies.

Principles of Experimental Media and Animation

A common understanding of the origins of cinema is that the Lumière brothers' short scenes of everyday life and scenic views represent the beginnings of the documentary tradition and that Georges Méliès's trick films represent the beginnings of narrative film. But as film scholar Tom Gunning has pointed out, both types of film had a common objective — to solicit the viewer's desire simply to *see* something. Gunning suggests that early cinema's "Look at me!" quality not only shapes key components of mainstream film (such as special effects, musical numbers, and comedy skits) but also prefigures avant-garde cinema, which demands that viewers see with fresh eyes. Gunning's framework also implies that documentary and narrative, live-action and animated elements can all be combined in experimental practice. From Émile Cohl's *The Automatic Moving Company* (1910), which uses animation to show spoons and other household items magically packing themselves away, to Douglas Gordon's *24-Hour Psycho* (1993), which slows down Alfred Hitchcock's 1960 film *Psycho* to play around the clock in a museum installation, experimental media have challenged viewers to think about form while experiencing a sense of wonder.

Abstraction and Figuration

Animation and experimental media range from abstract explorations of shape, color, line, and volume in motion to photographed, drawn, or modeled figures and scenes arranged in patterns or integrated into stories. As we have suggested, animation is one of many modes of experimental media making. Although much animation is used for conventional storytelling, it can also be considered experimental in the ways that it defies the rules of physics and the boundaries between the sentient and nonsentient.

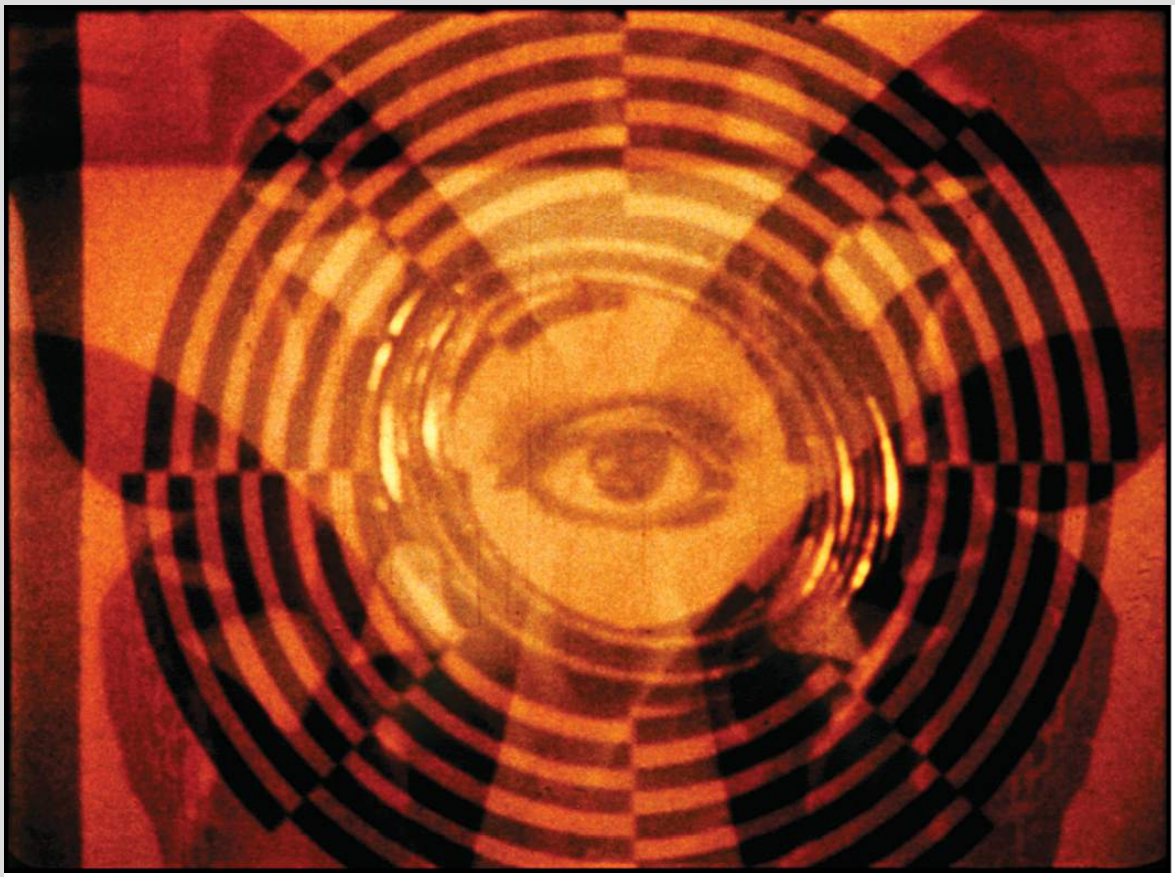
Abstraction

VIEWING CUE

Consider how abstraction is achieved and used in a film screened for class. How do repetition and variation contribute to the film's shape?

Abstract films are formal experiments that are also nonrepresentational — that is, human or other figures are not recognizable in them. Abstract films use color, shape, and line to create patterns, rhythms, and impressions in the viewer, and animation figures prominently as an approach. Just as an abstract painting might foreground the texture of paint and the shape of the canvas, an abstract film might explore the specificities of film as a time-based medium by alternating forms rhythmically. Tony Conrad's *The Flicker* (1965) rigorously edits black-and-white frames to emphasize a phenomenological experience — the flicker effect that

the audience is subjected to when a film is projected. Animator Len Lye was a pioneer in direct or cameraless animation, scratching patterns and lines directly on film stock in films including *Free Radicals*, started in 1958 but not released until 1979. Abstraction has been embraced by a range of movements: the 1920s absolute cinema of Richter and Eggeling, 1960s psychedelic films including Storm De Hirsch's *Third Eye Butterfly* (1968) **[Figure 9.23]**, and present-day motion graphics. Whether designed for aesthetic, kinetic, or emotional effect, abstract moving image works draw on nonrepresentational traditions and distill cinema to its most basic principles.



Courtesy of Anthology Film Archives, New York.

9.23 ***Third Eye Butterfly*** (1968). Patterns emerge from natural and spiritual imagery in a film by Storm De Hirsch, one of the few women working in abstract film.

Figuration

Most photographically based (rather than animated) film is automatically figurative — that is, it features recognizable aspects of the real world, including the human form. While many experimental films are non-narrative in that they lack well-defined characters or logical plots (see Chapter 7), it is hard to avoid narrative in a time-based medium because its basics are implied in the sequence of beginning, middle, and end. But experimental films vary in how they use figuration. For some viewers, Alain Resnais's *Last Year at Marienbad* (1961) is a non-narrative study in the structural repetition and geometry of the rooms, hallways, and gardens of a baroque estate. For others, the film's formalism obscures a disturbing narrative of a man's sinister pursuit of a woman **[Figure 9.24]**. Chantal Akerman's minimalist compositions make humans stand out as forms in space rather than characters with psychological depth. In her most widely praised film, *Jeanne Dielman, 23 Quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* (1975), Akerman's consistent use of a stationary long take to frame images as flat planes makes the viewer's attention oscillate between narrative and formal figures of space and time.

9.24 ***Last Year at Marienbad*** (1961). Characters and mise-en-scène suggest a narrative, but formal patterns disrupt linear time and coherent space.

Often new technological capabilities encourage speculation on the relationship between figure and form. A dreamlike, collage aesthetic builds on a simple narrative premise in Terence Nance's inventive *An Oversimplification of Her Beauty* (2012). A voiceover sets up a scenario: you have come home from work and found that the woman you planned to spend the evening with has canceled, and then asks, "How would you feel?" Possible responses are played out through animated sequences, narrative asides, voiceover variations, and replays with different camera formats and effects **[Figure 9.25]**.

Narrative becomes a vehicle for experimenting through gamelike play and a way of anchoring more fanciful sounds and images for the viewer. Immersive experiences designed for virtual-reality technologies also explore figuration and narrative as both universal hook and individual perspective. In Milica Sec's *Giant* (2016), a family is trapped in a war zone, and the parents distract their young daughter by making up a story in which bomb blasts are the footsteps of a giant. In animation, character design often plays with the elasticity of figuration — quite literally in the case of Elastigirl from *The Incredibles* (2004) and *The Incredibles 2* (2018), who can stretch her limbs as far as Pixar's animators' imagination permits.

9.25 ***An Oversimplification of Her Beauty*** (2012). Animated interludes punctuate live-action sequences in a recursive tale of romance narrated in the second person.

Experimental Organizations: Associative, Structural, and Participatory

Mainstream narrative films have predictable patterns of enigma and resolution, and documentaries follow one of a number of expository practices. Experimental works may organize experiences in ways that defy realism and rational logic or in patterns that follow strict formal principles. Whether experimental forms are abstract or representational and whether or not they draw on narrative, we can think of their organizations in the following ways — associative, structural, or participatory.

Associative Organizations

Sigmund Freud used free association with his patients to uncover the unconscious logic of their symptoms and dreams. Associative organizations create psychological or formal resonances, giving these films a dreamlike quality that engages viewers' emotions and curiosity. Associative organizations can be abstract, such as in musicologist Harry Smith's films that animate shapes in succession or create resonances between objects and shapes or colors **[Figure 9.26]**. They also can be representational, like in music videos, whose narratives may follow a dreamlike logic of psychological patterns or violent juxtaposition.

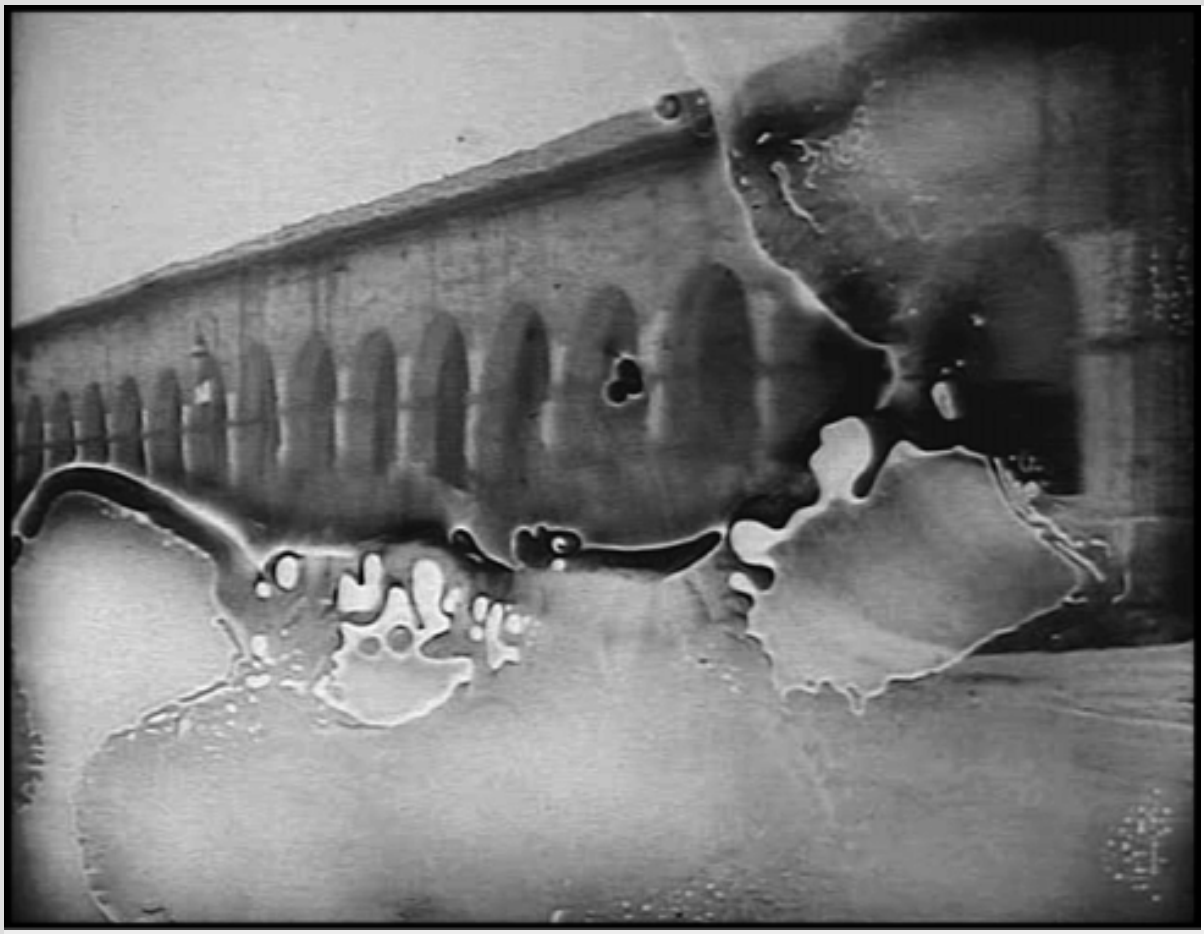
9.26 ***Film Number 7*** (1951). Famous for his collections of American folk music, Harry Smith also made inventive animations in which found objects are organized in abstract associative patterns.

VIEWING CUE

What is the principle of organization of the next experimental film you see in class? Identify the most representative shot or sequence, and discuss its meaning.

A film might establish a metaphorical association between two objects or figures by a cut or a compositional association or by creating metaphors in the voiceover commentary as it responds to

and anticipates images in the film. Juxtaposing images of workers being shot and a slaughtered bull, as Sergei Eisenstein does in *Strike* (1925), evokes the brutal dehumanization of the workers. Derek Jarman's *Blue* (1993) is an experimental autobiography meditating on the color blue and its chain of associations in the life of the filmmaker, who went blind as he was dying of AIDS. Accompanying one single blue image, a voice associates the "blue funk" created by a doctor's news, the "slow blue love on a delphinium day," and "the universal love in which all men bathe." Bill Morrison's *Decasia* (2002) edits together old films whose nitrate stock has deteriorated so that recognizable images and spaces blend into abstract splotches and blobs **[Figure 9.27]**. Associations emerge in the dance of fleeting shapes, edited juxtapositions, and imagery called forth by Michael Gordon's symphonic soundtrack.



9.27 *Decasia* (2002). Patterns created by decaying nitrate film stock emerge on the surface of found footage, the layering suggesting impermanence and loss.

The association may be a more obviously symbolic one. In Czech filmmaker Jiˇrí Trnka's experimental film *The Hand* (1965), a puppet struggles against the domination of a single, live-action hand that demands he make only other hands and not flowerpots. The hand is a chillingly effective symbol of totalitarian regimes in eastern Europe at that time.

Structural Organizations

Experimental films that employ structural organizations engage the audience through a formal principle rather than a narrative or chain of associations. Such films may focus on the material of the film itself, such as its grain, sprockets, and passage through a projector. This organization, which may follow a particular editing logic or image content, informs a wide variety of media artworks, including the stationary camera films of Andy Warhol, the video works of artist Bruce Nauman, the use of repetitions in the music videos of Michel Gondry, or digital artworks generated by algorithms.

Artist Christian Marclay's *The Clock* (2010) is a widely acclaimed example of a structural film. This twenty-four-hour film is compiled entirely of clips from films and television shows that include clocks or other timepieces referencing the real time of viewing. The museum installation is both conceptual and experiential. The viewer can tell the time from the artwork itself and also engage in the pleasure of an extended "mash-up" of thousands of time-related scenes.

The structural film movement of the 1960s and 1970s included works that weave images, framings, camera movements, or other formal dimensions into patterns and structures that engage the viewer perceptually and often intellectually. Michael Snow's *Wavelength* (1967) is a forty-five-minute image that slowly moves across a room in an extended zoom-in and ends with a close-up of a picture of ocean waves pinned to the wall **[Figure 9.28]**. Punctuated with vague

references to a murder mystery and accompanied by a high-pitched sound that explores another meaning of “wavelength,” this movie is an almost pure investigation of the vibrant textures of space — as flat, as colored, as empty, and most of all, as geometrically tense. In a sly nod to the altered temporal capacities of digital media, Snow superimposed the film on itself to make a new version: *WVLNT (or Wavelength for Those Who Don’t Have the Time)* (2003).

Courtesy of Michael Snow

9.28 Filmstrip showing frames of *Wavelength* (1967). An extended zoom-in for the duration of the film creates suspense through its formal structure.

Other films central to the structural film movement in the United States include Ernie Gehr’s *Serene Velocity* (1970) and Hollis

Frampton's *Zorns Lemma* (1970). *Serene Velocity* consists of images of the same hallway taken with structured variations in the camera's focal length, creating a hypnotic, rhythmic experience of lines and squares. In *Zorns Lemma*, a repeated sequence of one-second images of words on signs and storefronts arranged in alphabetical order creates a fascinating puzzle as letters are replaced one by one with a set of consistent, though arbitrary, images **[Figure 9.29]**. The viewer learns to associate the images with their place in the cycle, in a sense relearning a picture alphabet. Such structural principles are fascinating intellectually, but Frampton's films, like the most effective structural films, also work on the viewer's senses.

Courtesy of Anthology Film Archives, New York.

9.29 ***Zorns Lemma*** (1970). Hollis Frampton's films are often organized around structural principles, as in this film's central sequence of images corresponding to cycles of the alphabet.

Participatory Experiences

A third experimental approach emphasizes participatory experiences — the centrality of the viewer and the time and place of exhibition to the media phenomenon. *Nervous System* (1994), a film performance by underground filmmaker Ken Jacobs, uses two projectors, a propeller, and filters through which audiences view the work. In 1970, Gene Youngblood coined the term **expanded cinema** for installation or performance-based experimental film practices and predicted that video and computer technology would allow moving-image media to extend consciousness. Nam June Paik delivered on this prediction in conceptual video art pieces like *Video Fish* (1975), which combined video monitors displaying images of fish and aquariums containing real fish.

Many filmmakers working in the art world design their pieces around the audience's experience. *Rapture* (1999), an installation by Iranian-born Shirin Neshat, projects 16mm film footage of men and women on opposite gallery walls to signify their separation in Iranian society under Islamic law, with the viewer both mediating and separating these worlds **[Figure 9.30]**. A leading figure in experimental film since the 1950s, Chris Marker created the island

Ouvrir as an art installation in the online environment *Second Life* in the 2000s, affording visitors a unique navigable experience.

9.30 ***Rapture*** (1999). Shirin Neshat is one of many contemporary fine artists who use film and video in gallery contexts to generate meaning through audience interaction.

In recent years, fan art, video blogs, and the vast range of user-generated content on YouTube have redefined participatory media. Multimedia artists today design experiences using digital tools for entertainment media, museum installations, or individual use that rely on users' selections, the sense of touch, and interface design as crucial artistic components. Artists and animators may design virtual-reality experiences for users wearing headsets that block out external stimuli, or **augmented reality (AR)** environments that combine design elements with a live view of the space with which the user is interacting. From game design to socially conscious

immersive art, computer animation techniques are breaking down distinctions between commercial and experimental media.

Animation Modes: 2-D, 3-D, Stop-Motion

Throughout film history, animators have experimented with myriad techniques to create the illusion of movement, many of which were incorporated into the commercial film industry. Although we cannot discuss every animation mode that has been developed over the years, this section discusses some of the most widespread modes.

In **traditional animation**, each image is hand drawn or painted and photographed in sequence onto single frames of film using an animation camera. The components of the image are often produced on transparent sheets of celluloid known as **cels**, which are layered and photographed against a painted background. In such **2-D animation**, only the moving elements of characters and props need to be changed every frame. To enhance the sense of depth in Disney's first feature animation in color, *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937), a **multiplane camera** was devised to move different layers of the image past the camera at different speeds.

Another traditional animation technique is **stop-motion photography**, recording figures in different positions in separate frames, creating the illusion of motion when projected. A sophisticated version of the technique is used in Henry Selick's

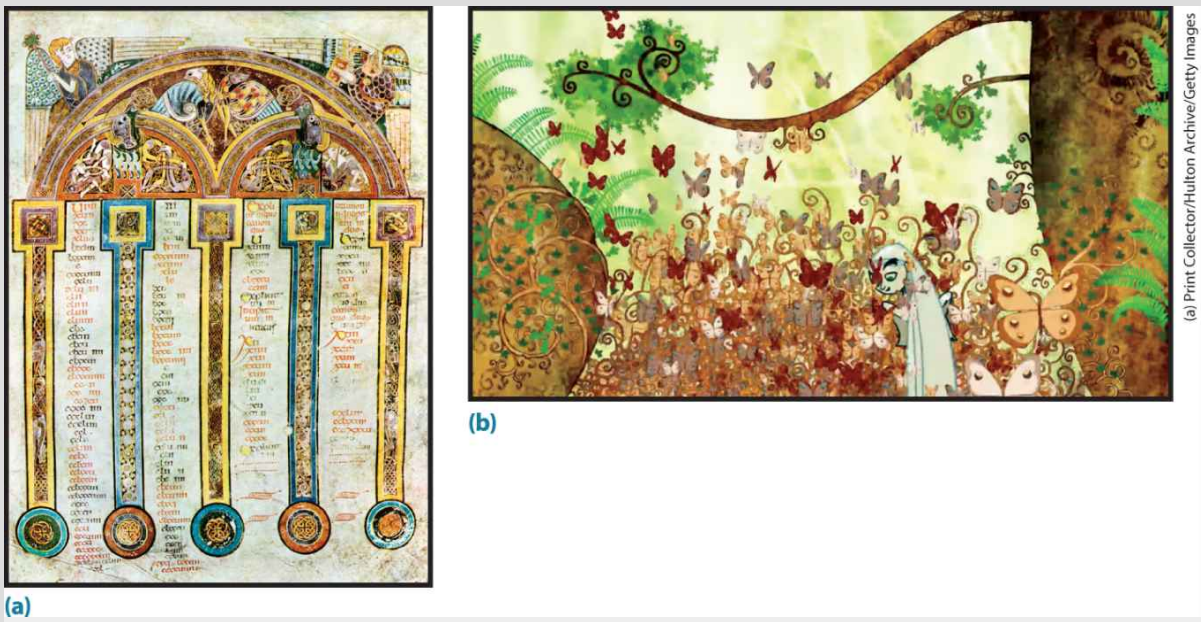
Coraline (2009), with the dimensionality of the figures highlighted by shooting in 3-D **[Figure 9.31]**. A form of stop-motion photography popular in mid-twentieth-century cartoons like Gumby, **claymation** was revived to great acclaim by Aardman Animations' Nick Park in British films including *Chicken Run* (2000). Claymation accomplishes the effect of movement with clay or plasticine figures, while **pixilation** employs stop-motion photography to transform the movement of human figures into rapid, jerky gestures. Czech filmmaker Jan Švankmajer's *Alice* (1988) combines live action, pixilation, and puppets to re-create the dizzying events of Lewis Carroll's story.

9.31 ***Coraline*** (2009). Henry Selick's distinctive stop-motion animation blurs the line between the heroine's real world and the alternative world where the characters have button eyes.

Most mainstream animated films today use computer-generated imagery (CGI). Under the direction of John Lasseter, Pixar Studios pioneered **computer animation**, the process of digitally generating moving images, with short films like *Luxo Jr.* (1986), which endowed an inanimate object with human qualities. Lasseter directed *Toy Story*, the first feature-length CGI-animated film, in 1995. In contrast to earlier 2-D techniques, characters and objects in this type of **3-D animation** are modeled in three dimensions, and animators move features, limbs, and props through **keyframes** that mark the important points and transitions between movements. The computer generates the images in between in the rendering process. Striking technological advances and bold aesthetic visions have contributed to the resurgence of animation as a medium in the digital era. Pixar, DreamWorks, and Illumination continue to produce CGI blockbusters for all ages in franchises like *Cars* (2006–2017), *Madagascar* (2005–2018), and *Despicable Me* (2010–2017), using vast teams of animators, with global success.

In films like Disney's *The Lion King* (2019) — which uses real environments but an entirely computer-generated cast of animal characters — the lines between animation and live-action filmmaking have increasingly blurred. As CGI has become pervasive, animation frequently is used without calling attention to itself, with technological development focusing on ever greater **photorealism** — the reproduction in animation of the details obtained in photography. But animation's long history in the fine

arts, where filmmakers have used color, line, and rhythm for abstract, lyrical, or fantastic effect, values pictorial quality over photorealism. For example, the 2-D animation of *The Secret of Kells* (2009) emulates the medieval illuminated manuscript known as the Book of Kells **[Figures 9.32a and 9.32b]**.



9.32a and 9.32b *The Secret of Kells* (2009). The Oscar-nominated animated feature *The Secret of Kells* uses traditional 2-D animation to reproduce the style of a medieval illuminated manuscript.

Description
Still (b) shows trees and a swarm of butterflies around an animated character, in the elaborate style of the manuscript.

Independent and experimental filmmakers continue to engage with animation in ways that push beyond realism. Richard Linklater's *Waking Life* (2001) and *A Scanner Darkly* (2006) employ **rotoscoping**,

an animation technique using recorded real figures and action as a basis for painting individual frames [Figure 9.33]. *Waltz with Bashir* (2008), an Israeli film about the horrors of the 1982 Lebanon war, contributed to the emerging genre of **documentary animation**, which tells true stories using animation images to emphasize subjective states or to avoid sensationalizing the subject matter.

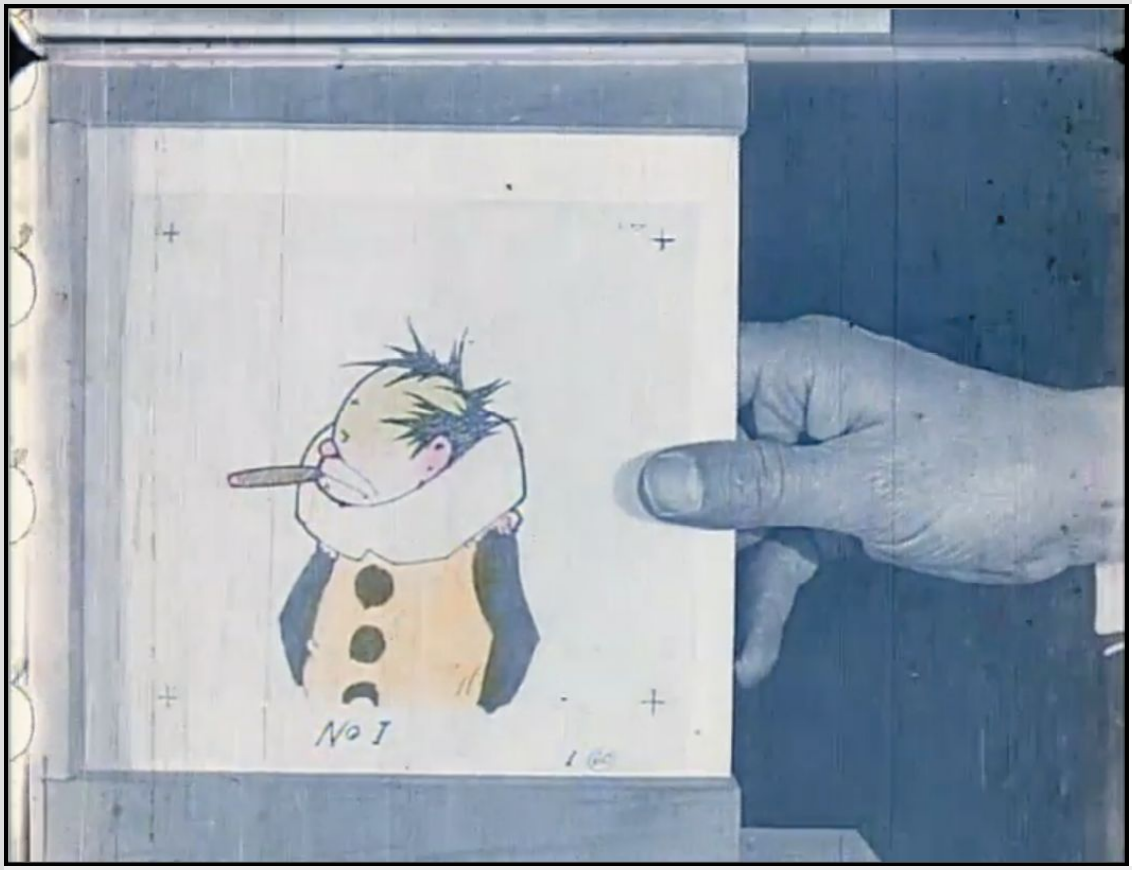
9.33 ***A Scanner Darkly*** (2006). For this Philip K. Dick adaptation, Richard Linklater had his actors filmed digitally and then animated using a rotoscope technique.

TECHNOLOGY IN ACTION

Animation through the Decades

At the end of the nineteenth century, Eadweard Muybridge and other cinematic pioneers employed new technologies to animate still photographs that, when seen through devices such as the phenakistocope, praxinoscope, and zoetrope,

created illusions of movement in human and animal figures. These devices are precursors to animated film. By 1911, Windsor McCay extended these technological experiments by hand-illustrating single frames of film stock that, when projected, offered short cinematic adventures, like his first film about his celebrated cartoon character Little Nemo **[Figure 9.34a]**. His early animated films explored fantasy worlds far different from the realism pursued in most Hollywood movies.



9.34a *Little Nemo* (1911). Audiences were already familiar with Little Nemo from Windsor McCay's popular cartoons. Here, the character makes his transition to film.

In the late 1920s through the 1940s, Walt Disney and his studio developed animation technology that became widely commercially successful. Beginning with *Steamboat Willie* in 1928 and through *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937) and the experimental *Fantasia* (1940), Disney combined animation with emerging sound technology and Technicolor processes to bring animation to mainstream

audiences. Modeled after the Hollywood studio production system, Disney's plots and characters were first carefully storyboarded and then handed over to a team of animators, who traced individual frames onto transparent acetate sheets called cels, which were then colored and photographed by a rostrum camera and converted to film stock **[Figure 9.34b]**. By the end of the twentieth century, the often laborious cel animation process gave way to computer-generated imagery (CGI) as the dominant animation technology. Some more recent movies, such as Cartoon Saloon's *The Secret of Kells* (2009) and *The Breadwinner* (2017), are digitally animated yet intentionally emulate the 2-D look of cel animation.

9.34b ***Fantasia*** (1940). Disney's ambitious experiment paired animation styles with classical music.

Although cel animation and CGI animation are the most prevalent technologies of their respective eras, other styles continue to flourish. One such style is stop-motion animation, which involves techniques developed in the first years of movie

history, most notably seen in the early films of Émile Cohl, such as *The Automatic Moving Company* (1910). Here, objects are photographed in separate frames with slight changes in their position, shape, or arrangement, which then come to life when projected as a film. In recent years, stop-motion animation has reached new creative, experimental, and commercial heights through the work of Jan Švankmajer, Stephen and Timothy Quay, and Tim Burton. A variation of stop-motion animation is clay animation or *claymation*, which uses carefully crafted clay figures and has produced several popular films, including *Chicken Run* (2000) [**Figure 9.34c**].

9.34c *Chicken Run* (2000). This family-oriented film from Aardman Animations proved that claymation can be both critically and commercially successful.

Thinking about Experimental Media and Animation

Experimental media asks viewers to reflect actively on the viewing experience, contemplating the way human senses and consciousness function. Whether they challenge us to figure out the meaning of symbolism or to relate a film to an artist's wider body of work or to a social context, experimental works require us to engage in some way. Animation's appeal is generally more direct, but it also engages our perception in novel ways. Both organize the viewer experience around film form. Experimental media and animation use a number of styles and approaches to expand the boundaries of human perception.

Expanding Perception

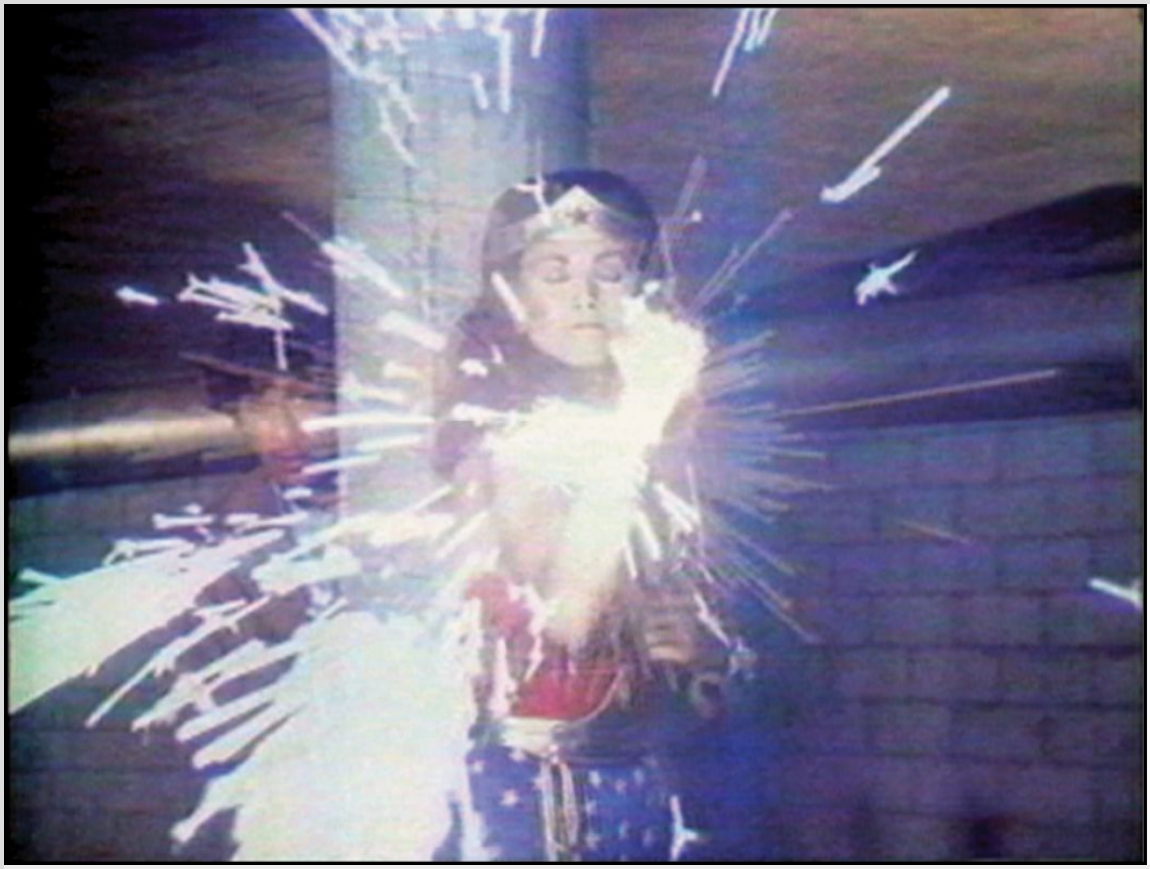
Experimental and animated works make meaning through challenging and expanding how viewers see, feel, and hear. For example, Hollis Frampton's *Lemon* (1969) presents only a single piece of fruit in changing light. For those who see this film, a lemon will never look the same. An experimental movie might use unusual filmic techniques or materials, such as abstract graphic designs and animation, as vehicles for seeing and thinking in fresh ways. Shirley Clarke's *Bridges-Go-Round* (1958) uses unexpected camera angles and

zooms to turn the massive structures of various bridges into an ethereal dance [Figure 9.35]. The animation of Satoshi Kon's science fiction anime film *Paprika* (2006) is as visually arresting as the film's premise of a new technology for entering others' dreams.

9.35 ***Bridges-Go-Round*** (1958). Shirley Clark used rhythmic editing, graphic patterns, and color tinting to make leftover footage of New York bridges dance in her experimental short.

Each new medium and technology brings new perceptual possibilities. Dziga Vertov celebrated the camera's capacity to see more, and differently, than the human eye in *Man with a Movie Camera* (1929). Decades later, television's ways of seeing became the

object of similar reflections in video art. In *Technology/Transformation: Wonder Woman* (1978–1979), Dara Birnbaum scrutinized the TV heroine's gestures as she transforms into her superhero persona by slowing and repeating them in a ritualistic fashion [Figure 9.36]. Such defamiliarization through appropriation of mass-media images is a key part of the visual culture of the digital age.



Dara Birnbaum. "Technology/Transformation: Wonder Woman," 1978–79. Courtesy Electronic Arts Intermix (EAI), New York.

9.36 ***Technology/Transformation: Wonder Woman*** (1978–1979). Dara Birnbaum was one of the first artists to explore the video medium's relationship with television by appropriating pop culture imagery.

Interactive media deliver new perceptual experiences through avatars and haptic controls. While its narrative is easy for audiences of all ages to understand, the Pixar film *Inside Out* (2015) provides a tangible example of how screen media expand our perception in its visualization of the emotions residing within its young protagonist.

Experimental Film Styles and Approaches

In its early decades, cinema was heralded as the "seventh art," and its practitioners and theorists were proud of incorporating practices from all the other arts and over the course of media history these aesthetic goals have remained central. The ways in which experimental and animated works engage and challenge their viewers can be categorized into two distinct traditions: expressive and confrontational.

Expressive Styles and Forms

VIEWING CUE

Watch the clip of *Gently Down the Stream* (1981) online. What specific images or words solicit your attention? What devices remind you of the elements of cinema? Are there any elements that bring to mind influences outside film?

Description
The scene shows inky black words overlaid on images of a man wearing eye glasses. A play button is present at the center of the screenshot.

Expressive styles emphasize personal expression and communication with an audience and are tied to long-standing notions of artistic originality, authenticity, and interiority. Impressionist painters used new techniques to render color and light as they were perceived, not as academic painting traditions prescribed. Cubist painters attempted to integrate spatial perception and temporal duration into their canvasses. These ways of seeing had a significant influence on the experiments with film art and animation in Paris and Berlin in the 1920s.

Expressive forms generally are rooted in lyrical and poetic traditions. Lyrical styles express emotions, beliefs, or some other personal position in film, much like the voice of a lyric poet does in literature. In an example of the intimacy film can achieve, Su Friedrich's *Gently Down the Stream* (1981) offsets black-and-white quotidian images with descriptions of the filmmaker's dreams scratched onto the surface of the film. Lyrical films may emphasize a personal voice or vision through the singularity of the imagery or through such techniques as voiceovers or handheld camera movements — using stories as the skeletons on which to elaborate and explore novel cinematic techniques and special effects. Stan Brakhage is perhaps the most poetic and most prolific filmmaker of a lyrical tradition. Themes of insight and blindness run through many of his films, which range in length from the nine-second *Eye Myth* (1967) to the five-hour *The Art of Vision* (1965). Another key figure in the American avant-garde, Kenneth Anger fuses homoeroticism, ritual, popular culture, and esoterica in lyrical works from his landmark *Fireworks* (1947) **[Figure 9.37]** (made when he was seventeen) to *Invocation of My Demon Brother* (1969).

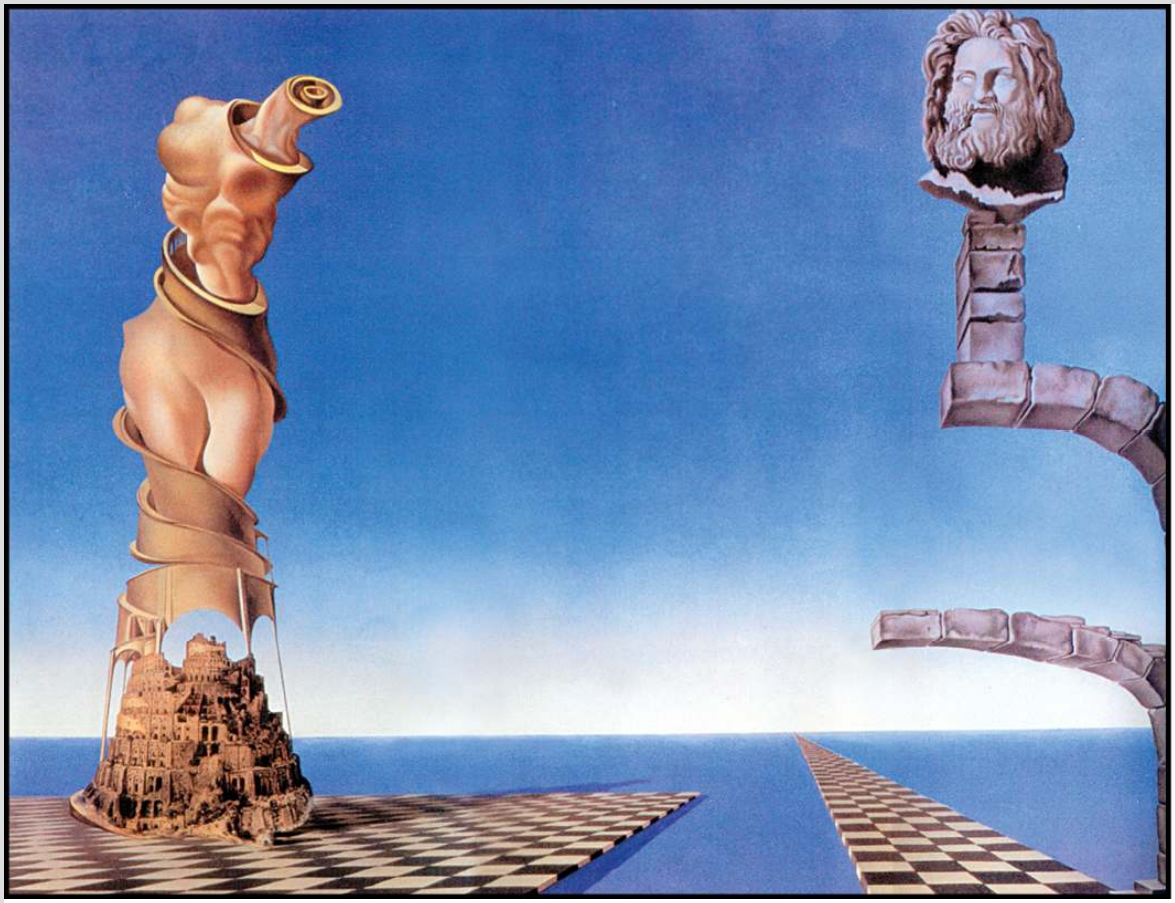
9.37 ***Fireworks*** (1947). Kenneth Anger's lyrical homoerotic reverie is one of the key early works of the American avant-garde.

Another expressive form takes cues from the surrealist movement. **Surrealist cinema**, which manipulated time, space, and material objects according to a dreamlike logic, was a driving force in Europe after World War I, especially in France. Early works include René Clair's *Entr'acte* (1924) and Germaine Dulac's *The Seashell and the Clergyman* (1928), based on a script by Antonin Artaud. The best-known surrealist film, however, is Luis Buñuel and Salvador Dalí's *Un chien andalou (An Andalusian Dog*) (1929). Beginning with a shocking assault on a woman's eye **[Figure 9.38]**, the film teases

viewers with the possibility of a story about a woman and her relationship with one or more men, drifts among unexplained objects (like a recurring striped box), and never emerges from its dream state. Through the powers of film to manipulate time, space, and material objects, surrealist filmmakers confronted middle-class assumptions about normalcy and created a dream world driven by dark desires.

9.38 ***Un chien andalou*** **(*An Andalusian Dog*)** (1929). The opening scene simulating a woman's eye slit by a razor — arguably the most famous moment in experimental film — exemplifies surrealism's use of shock.

Surrealism has often found expressive form in animation — both directly, as in Dalí's collaboration with Walt Disney, *Destino* (1945, 2003) **[Figure 9.39]**, and more indirectly, as in Japanese master Hayao Miyazaki's *Spirited Away* (2001). Both films create utterly unique, surreal worlds. Stephen and Timothy Quay's *Street of Crocodiles* (1986), constructed through stop-motion photography and based on the memoirs of Polish author Bruno Schulz, is a dark tale of a porcelain doll trapped in a sinister, nightmarish environment of animate screws and threads. Here the remarkable life of thread and other objects — and not the thread of a story — shapes and organizes the film.



Photofest, Inc.

9.39 *Destino* (1945, 2003). Salvador Dalí's unlikely collaboration with Walt Disney remained unfinished until its release in 2003.

An expressive impulse is also at the heart of the American underground film. During the 1960s and 1970s, the American counterculture of "sex, drugs, and rock and roll" broke free of the perceived repressive social values, barriers, and gender roles of the 1950s. The San Francisco–based twin brothers George and Mike Kuchar made campy films like *Hold Me While I'm Naked* (1966) **[Figure 9.40]**, while Marie Menken discovered a more painterly film language in such works as *Glimpse of the Garden* (1957). A network of alternative cinemas and university screenings brought these works and their makers into contact with what became devoted audiences of filmmakers, critics, students, and other artists.

9.40 ***Hold Me While I'm Naked*** (1966). Filmmaker George Kuchar stars as a director frustrated by his failure to create the highly artistic film he envisions. The campiness and comic nature of the film are compounded by his odd clothing.

Description
George Kuchar wears a thick robe, thick-rimmed glasses, a scarf, and a cloth wrapped around his head.

Expressive traditions also emerge from specific technologies and properties of the medium. For example, the small-gauge formats of 16mm and 8mm and, later, portable video equipment developed for amateur use were taken up very early for artistic purposes. Artists exploited the intimacies of these media, such as the diary-like formula used by Jonas Mekas in the 1950s and adopted by video artists in the 1970s and web video artists today. The nonprofit site Rhizome (https://rhizome.org/) hosts and preserves work by new media artists that otherwise would have limited chances of exposure. Although the vast majority of the user-generated work posted online would not be associated with experimental film by their makers or viewers, the technology that is being used and the expressive impulse fit very much into this tradition.

Confrontational Approaches

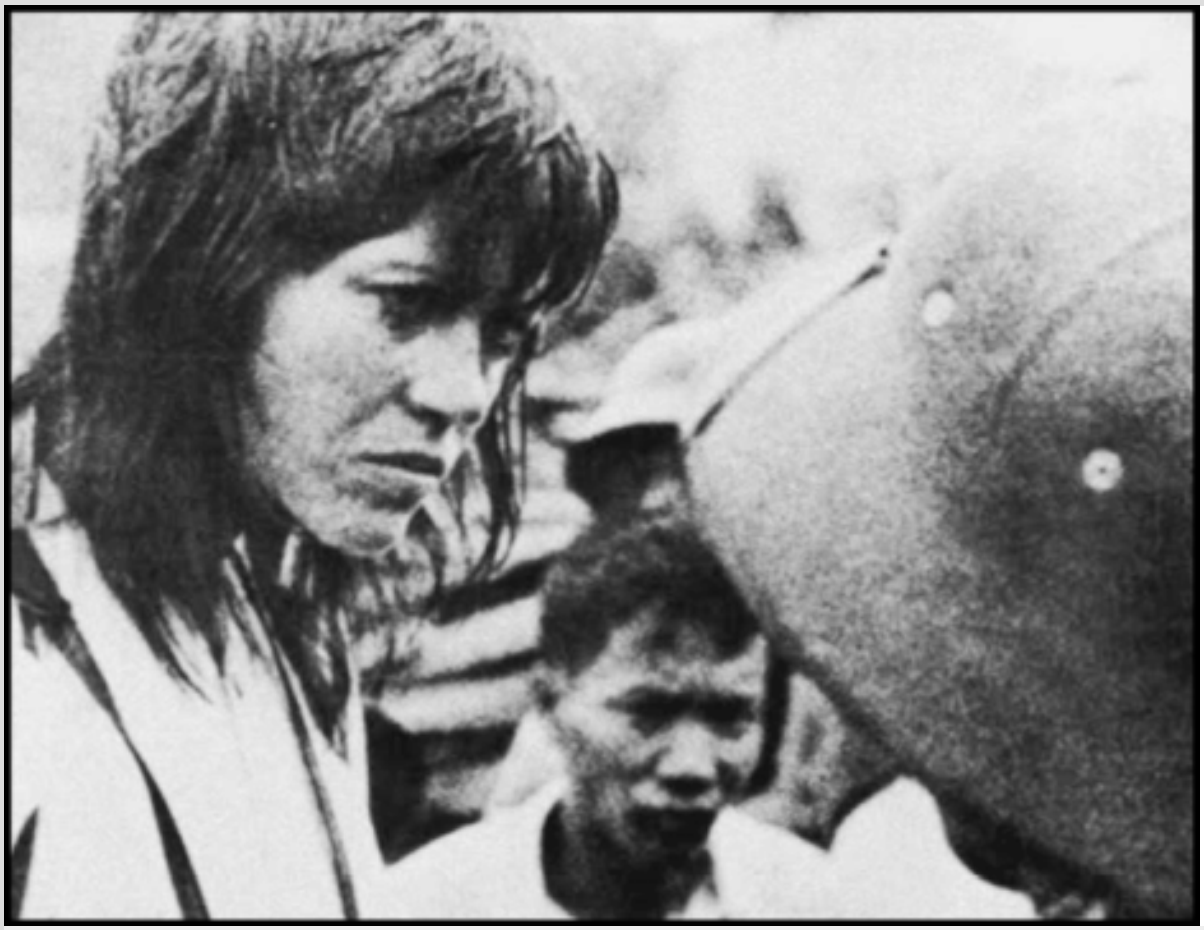
The shock of the modern — beautiful machines capable of brutal destruction, juxtapositions of commerce and art, time sped up, and

distances eliminated — manifested in a confrontational modernist impulse across the arts. Sometimes the urge was to shock the middle class — as in *Olympia* (1863), the frank painting of a prostitute by Édouard Manet, or the eyeball slicing of *Un chien andalou (An Andalusian Dog*) (1929; see Figure 9.38). Sometimes it was to document the democratization of art in a changing world, such as in Eugène Atget's photographs of Paris storefronts. As German cultural theorist Walter Benjamin argued in his famous 1936 essay, "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility," the very notion of artistic originality was challenged by the photograph and taken even further by film, which courted a mass, public audience.

The avant-garde artists and filmmakers of the 1920s saw their role as vitally linked to the times, whether in embracing a machine aesthetic in their work or in making films suitable to the proletarian revolution in the Soviet Union. Such an attitude goes against Romantic traditions of artistic expressivity and shapes the impulse toward confrontation — of conventions, audiences, or expectations and associations — in the context of a wider social, political, or aesthetic critique.

The European avant-gardes of the 1920s became a model for filmmakers like Jean-Luc Godard. His films in the 1960s were partly experimental, challenging commercial film conventions through unusual sound and image juxtapositions or by having actors go in

and out of character. But as the critical and political environment of this period became more intense, the confrontational impulse of what became known as **counter cinema** went deeper. Godard and his collaborators started making consciously noncommercial films like *British Sounds* (1970) under the name Dziga Vertov Group. In 1972, Godard and his partner, Jean-Pierre Gorin, made a film called *Letter to Jane* that scrutinizes a still photograph of liberal American actress Jane Fonda listening sympathetically on a visit to Vietnam. In voiceover, Godard and Gorin critique this image for its political naiveté **[Figure 9.41]**. The radicalism of this period was hard to sustain, but the confrontational impulse informs all of Godard's work. For example, the intricate image and sound montages of the multipart *Histoire(s) du cinéma* (1988–1998) ask viewers to look at all the meanings that images accumulate over time.



9.41 ***Letter to Jane*** (1972). Jean-Luc Godard and Jean-Pierre Gorin critique a photograph of American actress Jane Fonda for the liberal — rather than radical — politics it represents. Although prescient in its scrutiny of celebrity culture, the film can be seen as misogynist and even cruel in its confrontational style.

Many critical and confrontational techniques are associated with political or theoretical positions that dismantle the assumed relationship between a word or an image and the thing it represents, encouraging audiences to participate in the experiments at hand. Such modernist aesthetic strategies are rooted in the social critiques of the late 1960s. One of the most interesting and influential approaches to the image-oriented society of consumer capitalism

was advanced by Guy Debord in a book and film called *The Society of the Spectacle* (1967 and 1973, respectively). Debord argued that images themselves — taken out of context through a process called *détournement* or diversion — were the only way to transform the image-oriented society. Trinh T. Minh-ha's *Surname Viet Given Name Nam* (1989) is an experimental documentary about Vietnamese women that does not use footage shot in Vietnam. Vietnamese American women act the roles of interviewees living in Vietnam who narrate their wartime experiences. The filmmaker's poetic voiceover, snatches of song, found footage, and unusual framings complicate the identities of these women and any effort to portray their experiences completely. Ultimately, the film raises more questions than it answers.

In the 1980s, video artists extended this critical function toward mainstream media, and new media works today often demand that viewers question *how* they are looking at something as well as *what* they are looking at.

VIEWING CUE

Watch a clip from *The Future* (2011) online. What aspects of the clip employ a traditional narrative style? What aspects of this narrative film bring to mind experimental film techniques?

Filmmakers of color have embraced experimental strategies to respond to dominant perspectives and imagine histories that have not been documented. From Britain, the Black Audio Film Collective's *Handsworth Songs* (1986) juxtaposes footage of rioting and West Indian carnival traditions with a voiceover that analyzes colonial history and the reasons for current racial unrest. In *Night Cries: A Rural Tragedy* (1989), Australian Aboriginal artist Tracey Moffatt uses stylized sets and sounds and disjunctive editing to tell a story about the mid-twentieth-century assimilation policies that forced single Aboriginal mothers to have their babies adopted by married white couples. Inspired by the recovery of parts of the film *Lime Kiln Club Field Day* (1914) — believed to be the oldest surviving film with an all-black cast — Garrett Bradley's short film *America* (2019) imagines a missing archive of films documenting African

American life in the 1910s in poetic images of quotidian life with an otherworldly soundtrack [Figure 9.42].

9.42 ***America*** (2019). The recovery of footage from a silent feature film with an all-black cast inspired this reverie on the lost image archive of African American life in the early twentieth century.

In the 1980s, activist videos — particularly those inspired by government indifference to the AIDS crisis — employed a confrontational style. Although based in documentary in its presentation of information, activist media also used experimental techniques of editing, design elements drawn from advertising and propaganda, and self-conscious voiceover and personal reflection. Tom Kalin's *They Are Lost to Vision Altogether* (1989) combines elegiac

imagery with footage of marches, portraying strategies of mourning and militancy employed by AIDS activists [Figure 9.43]. Activist media in the digital era takes many different forms, from deflecting the messages of mainstream media through reediting to citizen journalism. For example, Firdaus Kharas is known for creating animated public service announcements and short videos to raise awareness of a range of humanitarian issues worldwide, reaching a vast audience through the confrontational power of media.

9.43 ***They Are Lost to Vision Altogether*** (1989). Artist Tom Kalin conveyed competing impulses of mourning and militancy in response to the AIDS crisis in the elegiac imagery of this videotape.

See also: *Perfect Blue* (1997); *Waking Life* (2001)

To watch a clip from *Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse* (2018), go to LaunchPad for *The Film Experience* at **launchpadworks.com**

Avant-garde films and blockbuster franchises represent the extreme poles of cinema as an economic endeavor. The former make no money as they push the boundaries of style and even understanding, while the latter gross billions by aiming for universal comprehension as they push the boundaries of technique and technology. But in the context of a widely familiar premise, blockbuster resources can bring stylistic experimentation and complex ideas to broad audiences. *Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse*, executive produced by Phil Lord and Chris Miller, is just such an endeavor, as it invites longtime fans of *Spider-Man* comics, cartoons, and live-action films into the depths and reaches of a transmedia world and guides other interested viewers through a mind-bending experience.

Into the Spider-Verse is an animated feature with a typical action-adventure plot involving saving the world(s) from a big bad guy. But as a visual experience, the film often resembles abstract cinema in its use of shape, color, and pattern. The decision to foreground style was a conscious one. The film employs a range of animation styles to correspond with its narrative premise: the primary villain, Kingpin, has invented a so-called “Super Collider,” which opens portals to a multiverse of alternative realities and threatens them all with destruction. However, each world has its own Spider-Man avatar, all of whom team up to defeat the villains and restore the laws of physics (however speculative they are in this context).

Spider-Man features prominently and in fact proliferates in this film, but the Sony-produced *Into the Spider-Verse* is not part of the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) in which Tom Holland stars as the live-action Spider-Man. The film also looks and feels different than the blockbuster aesthetics of the MCU films. In fact, comic-book movies, one of the dominant genres of the twenty-first century (three *Spider-Man* movies are among the twenty-five top-grossing films of the 2000s) often do not utilize the aesthetics and stylistic possibilities of the comic book medium. *Into the Spider-Verse*, adapted from a 2014 comic-book arc titled *Spider-Verse*, sets out to change this by experimenting with technology to serve an artistic vision rather than realism. The film overlays computer-generated 3-D imagery with 2-D elements, and its production design incorporates graphic elements from comics like panels, onscreen typography mimicking sound effects, misaligned color separation, and the occasional thought box **[Figure 9.44]**. Ben-Day dots — the dots used to produce color in an ink-saving printing process developed by Benjamin Henry Day Jr. for mid-twentieth-century comic books — are even visible onscreen as part of the filmmakers' conscious effort to replicate the look and feel of comics **[Figure 9.45]**. *Into the Spider-Verse* reminds us that comic books are a personal genre that elicits our creativity and imagination as readers and collectors.

9.44 ***Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse*** (2018). The film's innovative animation techniques combine graphic and cinematic 2-D and 3-D elements.

Description
Comic book-style sound effect text to the left of Spider-Man's hand as it shoots webbing reads,"Thwap!"

9.45 ***Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse*** (2018). Thought-boxes and Ben-Day dots evoke comic box storytelling and printing techniques.

Description
A comic book-style text box in the background of the scene reads,"everyone knows."

This approach complements the film's thematic emphasis on questions of identity. The film's soon-to-be-super hero is Miles Morales (Shameik Moore), an Afro-Latino high school student and aspiring graffiti artist from Brooklyn. He reads about Spider-Man in comic books, but in his world, Spider-Man exists, and these are true tales. When Peter Parker (the original Spider-Man, here voiced by Jake Johnson) dies in the line of duty, Miles shows up at a rally in a hoodie and a Spider-Man costume, his clothing invoking his membership in communities formed around both fandom and activism **[Figure 9.46]**. After his inevitable encounter with a radioactive spider, Miles begins to craft an identity from a stack of comic books, and devices from their pages proliferate onscreen. The idea that superpowers can and should be distributed to people of all races, genders, and socioeconomic

classes is developed throughout the narrative and is reinforced when Miles meets his counterparts from other dimensions. These include a young woman named Gwen Stacey, a little girl called Peni Parker, and a pig known as Peter Porker. Different animation styles of the past and present are evoked when rendering these figures **[Figure 9.47]**. Peni Parker is drawn in the style of Japanese anime, with its lower frame rate and jerkier feel, and she is accompanied by a robot whose visual design evokes "mecha" anime like *Mobile Suit Gundam* (1979–1981) and *Neon Genesis Evangelion* (1995–1996). Meanwhile, Peter Porker evokes the madcap imagery of classic Warner Bros. cartoons and the beloved Porky Pig. Spider-Man Noir rounds out the superteam. His name, black-and-white aesthetic, and attire — a trench coat and a fedora, like a protagonist of a classic detective movie — evoke film noir (see p. 364 in Chapter 10).

9.46 ***Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse*** (2018). Anyone can wear the mask: Miles wears a store-bought costume to Peter Parker's memorial. His hoodie may also recall slain youth Trayvon Martin.

9.47 ***Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse*** (2018). Spider-Man avatars each evoke a different graphic, anime, or cartoon style.

Detaching the superhero's persona from a secret identity that is predictably white and adult male, the film invites the genre's diverse fan base to imagine themselves in the starring role. As Miles says directly to the audience at the end of the film, "Anyone can wear the mask. You can wear the mask! If you didn't know that before, I hope you do now." Complementing this democratization of superhero identity and the representation of female and nonwhite figures onscreen are the nonfigural design elements that the film uses to realize its inclusive imagination as gravity-defying and interconnected. While Miles's reality is rendered with depth perception, many frames use the flatness of the screen for pictorial effect, like the panels of comics (and pop art inspired by comics). The sequence at the film's climax, as the heroic team of Spider-people battle the villains in a psychedelic dimensional space, is an extravaganza of color and pattern **[Figure 9.48]**.

9.48 ***Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse*** (2018). Nonfigural elements of color and pattern link the film's animation style to abstract films.

In its focus on exploring the kinetic possibilities of comics, *Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse* shares a great deal with formalist and medium-specific film experiments. At the same time, it diverges sharply from the aims of avant-garde cinema; it is story driven, crafted by an immense team of animators and artists, and inhabits a coherent — though multiple — world. By drawing on specific elements of cultural identity, like Miles's interest in graffiti art and its animation, the film engages audiences in the synthesis of two kinds of film experiences.

Chapter 9 Review

SUMMARY

- **Animation** is the use of cinema technology to give the illusion of movement to drawings, paintings, figures, or computer-generated images. **Experimental media** include noncommercial, non-narrative films known as **avant-garde films**, as well as **video art** and **new media** technologies.
- The ideas and technology in animated and experimental media stem from the artistic responses to rapid industrial and cultural changes associated with **modernism**.
    - During the silent film era, the European avant-garde flourished and included impressionism, cubism, and animated experiments in abstraction known as **absolute film**.
    - In the 1930s and 1940s, language barriers introduced by film sound and the rise of fascism challenged the European avant-garde, and the American avant-garde became more prominent.
        - During this period, Disney's animated films found widespread commercial success, and Japanese **anime** was established.
    - The decades after World War II saw a revitalization of experimental film.

    - **Underground film** arose as part of the counterculture in New York and San Francisco.
    - **Structural film** was another experimental movement, in which films were organized around formal principles.
  - From 1968 to 1980, experimental and animated film proliferated in many countries across the world.
    - **Third Cinema**, characterized by realist strategies and populist intentions, emerged in countries like Argentina, Cuba, and the Philippines.
  - In the 1980s and 1990s, rapid technological changes transformed animated and experimental film.
    - Inexpensive consumer video formats spurred growth in activist videos and video art, while MTV brought experimental techniques into the mainstream.
    - In animated film, **computer-generated imagery (CGI)** became the dominant technology.
    - Today, media artists use platforms like YouTube and technologies like **machinima**, virtual reality, and **augmented reality (AR)** to blur the line between artists and viewers.
- Experimental film and narrative film both aim to solicit viewers' desire to see something. Avant-garde cinema, in particular, demands that viewers see with fresh eyes.
  - Animated and experimental films range from *abstraction* — explorations of shape, color, line, and volume in motion — to

figuration, the arrangement of human or other figures in patterns or into stories.
    - Three primary ways of thinking about the organization of animated and experimental film are *associative, structural*, and *participatory*.
- Filmmakers have experimented with many modes of animation throughout film history.
    - **Traditional animation** (also called **2-D animation**) involves layering images on transparent sheets called **cels**.
    - **Stop-motion photography** involves recording figures in different positions in separate frames. **Claymation** and **pixilation** are two types of stop-motion photography.
    - Most mainstream animated films today use **computer animation** (also called **3-D animation**), often with the goal of achieving **photorealism**. Other filmmakers push beyond realism with techniques like **rotoscoping** and innovative genres like **documentary animation**.
- More than other forms of cinema, experimental media often ask viewers to reflect actively on the experience of watching and listening.
    - Within experimental film, we identify two historical traditions: *expressive* and *confrontational*.
        - Films in the expressive tradition are often poetic or lyrical, emphasizing aesthetics and imagination.
        - Films in the confrontational tradition seek to shock or disturb an audience, often with an underlying political or

social purpose.

KEY TERMS

animation
experimental media
avant-garde films
video art
new media
modernity
absolute film
live-action movie
anime
underground film
structural film
Third Cinema
found footage
computer-generated imagery (CGI)
machinima
expanded cinema
augmented reality (AR)
traditional animation
cels
2-D animation
multiplane camera
stop-motion photography
claymation
pixilation

computer animation
3-D animation
keyframe
photorealism
rotoscoping
documentary animation
surrealist cinema
counter cinema

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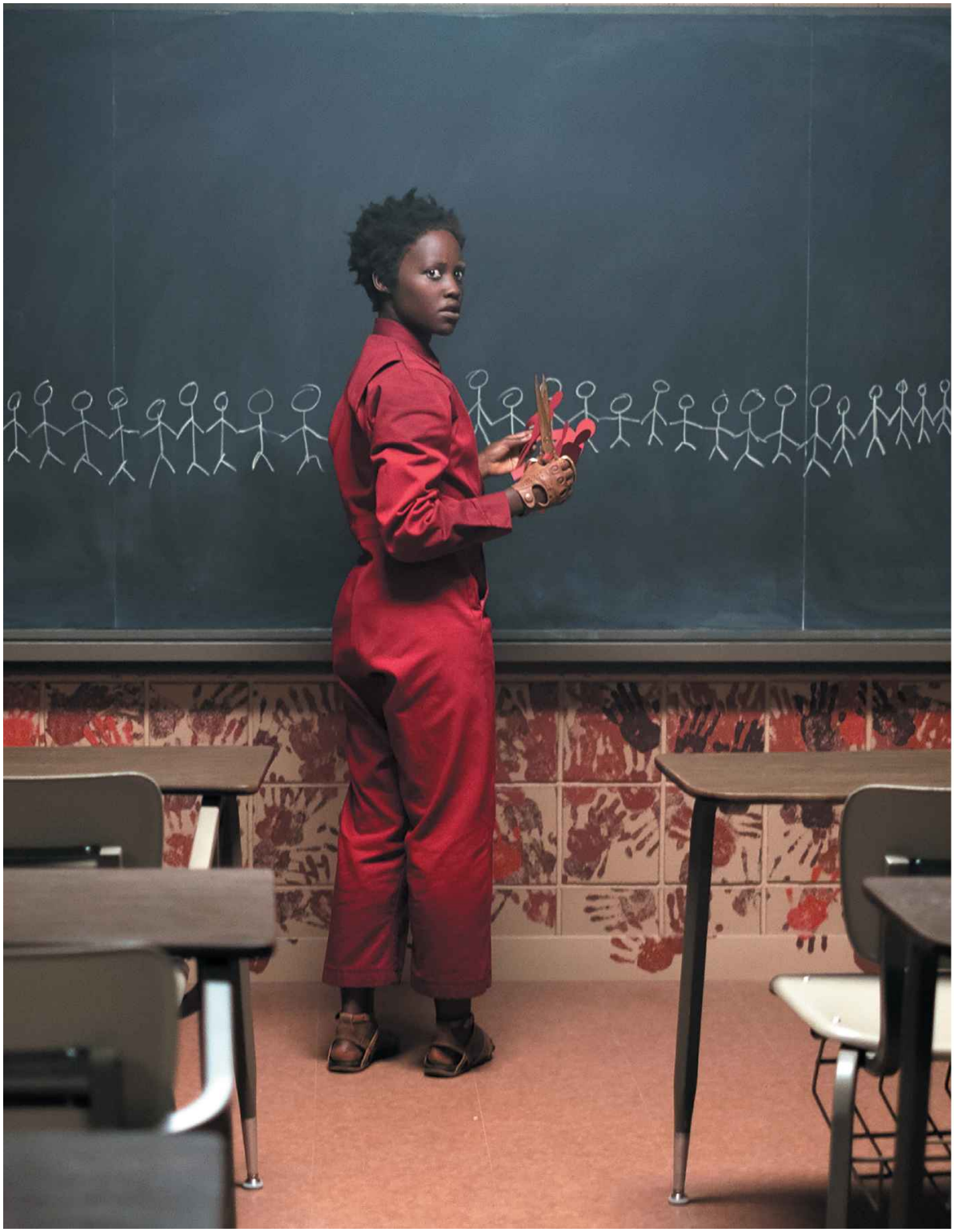
CHAPTER 10 MOVIE GENRES
Conventions, Formulas, and Audience Expectations



TCD/Alamy

Description

The blackboard shows a chalk drawing of many stick figures holding hands from the left side of the frame to the right side. The woman is cutting out red stick figures holding hands.

The T-shirts worn by the kids in Jordan Peele's *Us* (2019) tip off the viewer that something scary may be lurking beneath the film's sunny California setting. In the film's first scene, set in 1986, a little girl chooses a T-shirt featuring Michael Jackson's *Thriller* as a boardwalk carnival prize. In a later scene, a young boy plays on the beach in a T-shirt emblazoned with the logo from the movie *Jaws*. When his mom momentarily loses sight of him, her frantic gaze around the crowded beach calls back to a set of point-of-view shots from that famous summer blockbuster. In this way, *Us* advertises itself as a horror film, offering viewers the pleasure of familiarity and the thrill of novelty, precisely the balance that many genre films seek to achieve.

The longer a genre remains popular, the more awareness of conventions of iconography, character, plot, and setting viewers bring with them to an individual film, allowing for an element of comedy that Peele exploits. *Us* isolates a family in a cabin in the woods and features plenty of jump scares and a bloody denouement. But as a follow-up to Peele's break-out hit *Get Out* (2017), which depicts suburbia as a nightmare for African Americans, *Us* also exploits horror's capacity for social critique and philosophical speculation. With its doppelgänger plot and its ad campaign featuring motifs of masking and mirroring, the film turns back on the viewer, a quality that most genre films share. While we know what to expect, we never know what we'll come away with.

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A **genre** is a category or classification of works that share similar subject matter, settings, iconography, and narrative and stylistic patterns. Genres exist across media or modes, from literature to film to television. Grounded in audience expectations about characters, narrative, and visual style, a film genre is a set of formulas and conventions repeated and developed throughout film history. Movies rely on variations of genres to allow audiences to share in expectations and routines. As viewers, we may choose to see a movie because we identify with its character types. We return to science fiction films — from the 1927 *Metropolis* to the 1979 *Alien* or its 2017 prequel *Alien: Covenant* — because we recognize and appreciate some version of a "mad scientist" who works in a mysterious laboratory in which new technology leads to strange and dangerous discoveries. One viewer may rush out to see *Godzilla* (2014) for the same reason that another viewer resolutely chooses not to see it — because it revives a sixty-year-old monster movie whose formulas and images are designed to appeal to viewers' awareness of these conventions **[Figure 10.1]**. Our different responses to particular genres help define the film community to which we belong.

10.1 *Godzilla* (2014). The genre formulas of the classic monster movies are recognizable but updated in this film.

As we will learn in this chapter, film genres carry their own specific cultural values. Narrative, documentary, and experimental films have each created particular genres associated with their respective organizations, but in this chapter we focus on six narrative film genres — comedy, western, melodrama, musical, horror, and crime. For each genre, we identify its primary formulas and conventions and consider how it evolves over time, reflecting and regulating specific social, cultural, and historical experiences.

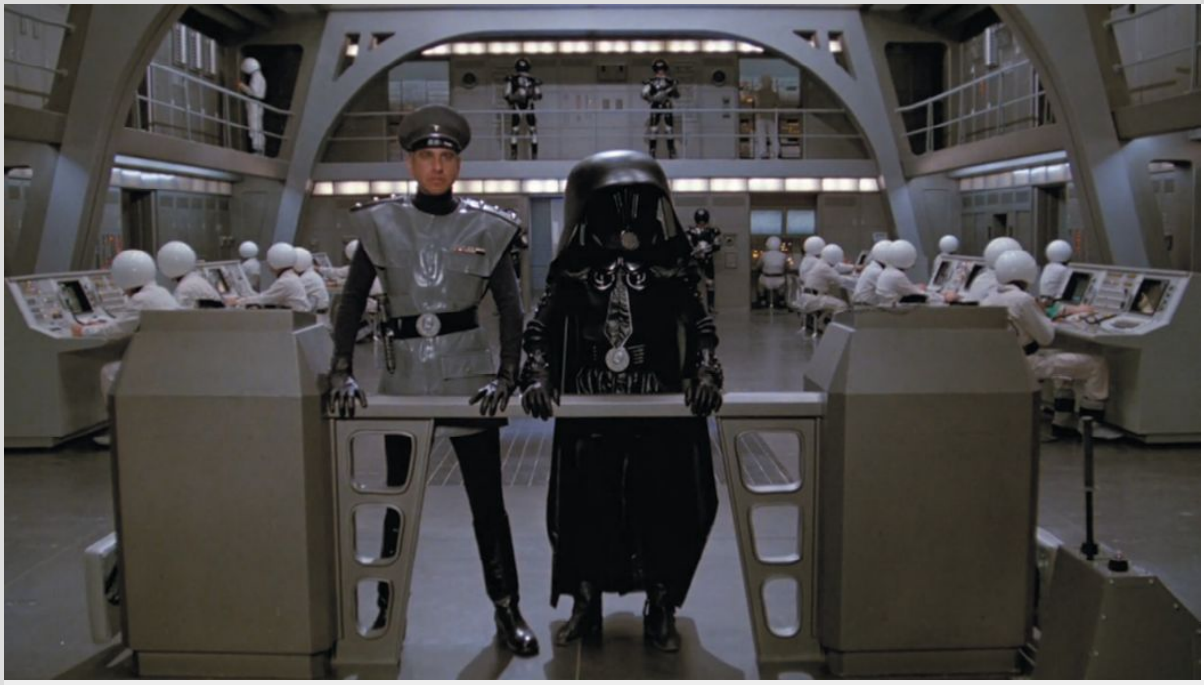
KEY OBJECTIVES

- Understand why film genres attract audiences.
- Describe the historical origins of film genres, and explain how they can change over time.

- Define the conventions, formulas, and expectations that are seen in genre films.
- Identify six major genres — comedies, westerns, melodramas, musicals, horror films, crime films — and their subgenres.
- Address how social organizations of race, class, gender, and national belonging inform different genres and their evolution.
- Summarize how audiences understand certain film genres as a way of making meaning.

A Short History of Film Genre

More explicitly and inventively than filmmakers before him, Mel Brooks has made a career of recycling and parodying the history of genre films. *Blazing Saddles* (1974) toys with the history of the western, brilliantly turned upside down with a protagonist who is an African American sheriff. *Young Frankenstein* (1974) transforms the monster movie, specifically the 1931 *Frankenstein*, when the traditionally passive female assistant jilts the usually neurotic scientist for the sexy monster he creates. *High Anxiety* (1977) mashes together the generic formulas of the thriller and exact iconic scenes from various Hitchcock films to comically expose the nervous anxiety that has always propelled the genre. *Spaceballs* (1987) pokes fun at the excessive merchandising of the *Star Wars* (1977–present) series **[Figure 10.2]**. The transparent and ironic relationship that Brooks cultivates with the history of the genres that precede his films has become a pervasive aspect of contemporary culture, from internet memes to television shows like *The Simpsons* (1989–present) to franchise movies like *Men in Black: International* (2019). Yet virtually all genre films implicitly or explicitly carry the marks and traces of a long generic history.



10.2 *Spaceballs* (1987). The film playfully and ironically spoofs the history of the science fiction genre, poking fun at well-known series such as *Star Wars, Star Trek*, and *Alien*.

Historical Origins of Genres

Well before the advent of the movies, genres were used to classify works of literature, theater, music, painting, and other art forms. Tragedy was considered the most important genre in Aristotle's *Poetics* in 350 BCE, and more specific literary genres like poetic ballads, pastoral and epic poems, and dime novels were identified and refined in subsequent historical periods. Musical genres included classical sonatas and symphonies, popular love songs, and children's lullabies. The seventeenth-century Dutch painter Pieter de Hooch created genre paintings that depicted scenes of domestic life and daily social encounters. In the eighteenth-century and early-

nineteenth-century paintings of David Wilkie, William Hogarth, and others, genre continued to suggest a "slice of life," or scenes aimed at familiarity, recognition, and shared (if heightened) human emotions **[Figure 10.3]**. This combination of domestic realism and theatricality linked genres to the stage, particularly to the staging of melodramas, the most popular genre of the nineteenth century **[Figure 10.4]**. In these different forms, three functions for genre began to take shape:

- to provide models for producing other works
- to direct audience expectations
- to create categories for judging or evaluating a work

HIP/Art Resource, NY.

10.3 ***Shortly After Marriage*** (1743). Prominent English genre painter William Hogarth painted satirical views of everyday life and contemporary mores.

Honest Hearts, c. 1895 (color litho)/American School, (19th century)/SWIM INK 2 LLC/Private Collection/Bridgeman Images.

10.4 *Honest Hearts.* Nineteenth-century stage melodramas, like this one by William L. Roberts, were forerunners of a central film genre.

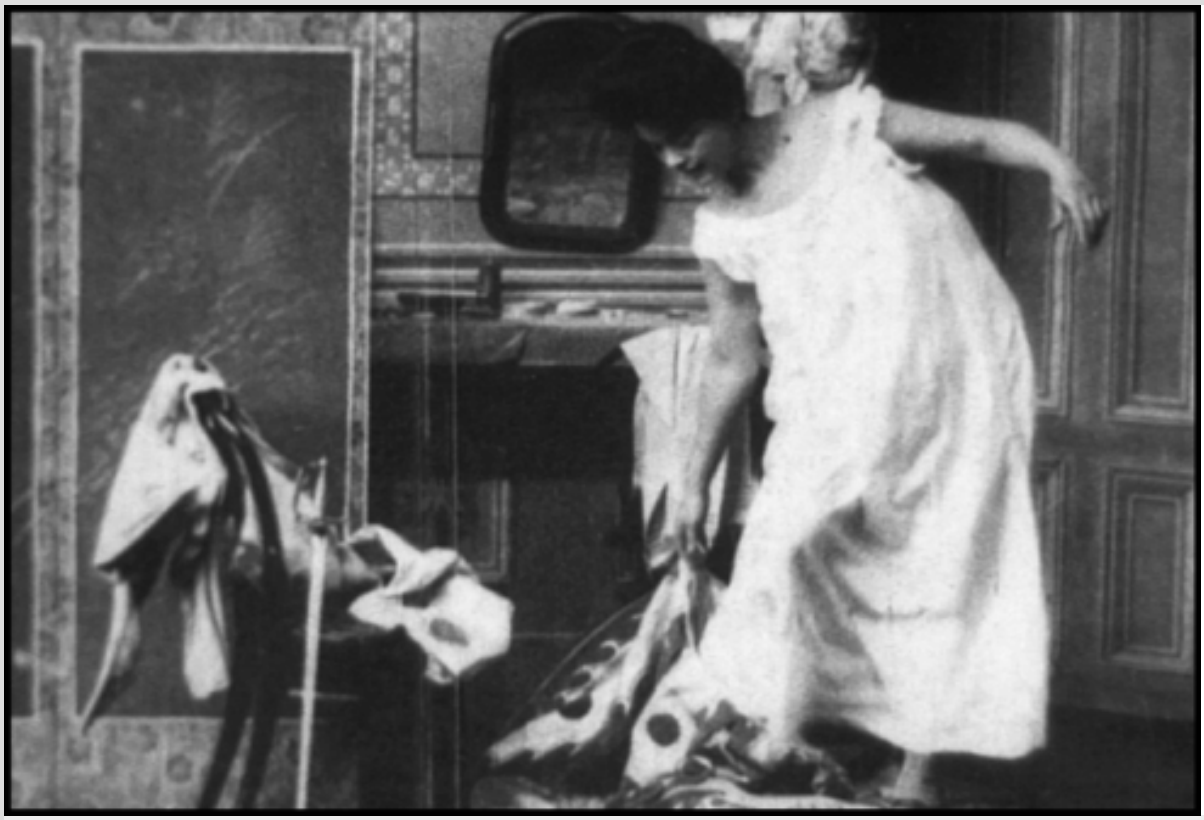
Description
Text at the top reads,"A story of old Kentucky." Text over the hearts reads,"Honest hearts by W m L Roberts." Text at the bottom reads,"Klimt and Gazzolo, owners."

For painters in the eighteenth century, for example, historical paintings needed to follow certain generic rules about what objects to include in a painting about a naval victory. Classical audiences learned to expect that all epic poems would begin with a generic invocation to the gods or a muse.

1890s–1910s: Early Film Genres

Early cinema immediately employed genres, building on the lessons of its predecessors in photography, literature, art, the popular press, and music halls. Even when films of the 1890s searched out new subject matter, objects, and events, rough generic patterns quickly developed. Common formulas for short films included scenics such as *Panoramic View of Niagara Falls in Winter* (1899), historical events as in *Carrie Nation Smashing a Saloon* (1901), and, less often acknowledged, semi-pornographic scenes in "blue movies," such as *From Show Girl to Burlesque Queen* (1903) **[Figure 10.5]**. As the film industry and its audiences expanded through the 1900s, other types

of films filled the catalog of early genres — scenes from the theater, sporting events, and slapstick comedies. As outdoor filming increased, westerns, a popular dime novel genre, became common.



10.5 ***From Show Girl to Burlesque Queen*** (1903). Erotic "blue movies" emerged as an early film genre.

1920s–1940s: Genre and the Studio System

Since the beginning of film history, the importance of genre and the popularity of specific genres have waxed and waned depending on context and culture. Although films used repeated subjects and

formulas (such as Shakespearean plays and chase scenes, respectively) from their beginnings, the rise of the studio system in the 1920s and 1930s provided ideal conditions for producing movie genres. In this context, the movie industry's model for genre parallels the industrial model for the Ford Motor Company. Fordism, the economic model that defined U.S. industry throughout much of the twentieth century, used the division of labor and the mass production of parts to improve quality and increase the numbers of cars manufactured. These efficiencies decreased consumer costs and increased consumption.

Tied to a studio system that adapted the industrial system of mass production, film genres enabled movie producers to reuse script formulas, actors, sets, and costumes to re-create, again and again, different versions of a popular movie. In the same way that a consumer might buy a Ford automobile in a new color or different style every seven years, a viewer might keep coming back to see the latest swashbuckler adventure film starring Douglas Fairbanks, like *The Thief of Baghdad* (1924).

The most famous Hollywood studios differed in size, strategies, and styles — from the smaller United Artists to the massive MGM — but each used a production system based on the efficient recycling of formulas and conventions, stars, and sets. Each studio was headed by a mogul who assigned a producer to each film, who in turn oversaw those many moveable parts that a studio had at its disposal.

In this environment, individual studios refined their production line techniques, established their association with specific genres, and used and refined that expertise to develop those genres. By the 1930s, Warner Bros. was identified with gangster films, Paramount with sophisticated comedies, MGM with musicals and melodramas, RKO with literary adaptations, Columbia Pictures with westerns, and Universal with horror films.

1948–1970s: Postwar Film Genres

The *United States v. Paramount* decision of 1948 — in which the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that the major studios violated antitrust laws by owning both studios and movie theaters and thereby monopolizing the film business — weakened the studio system and thus a cornerstone of movie genres. Without control of a distribution network of theaters to ensure the profitability of its production decisions, the studio system gradually began its decline, and with it waned the golden years of American film genres. Genre movies certainly continued to be made and **film noir** (literally "black film" in French) emerged in Hollywood films of the 1940s, shot using stylized black-and-white cinematography in nighttime urban settings and featuring morally ambiguous protagonists, corrupt institutions, dangerous women, and convoluted plots. The genre reflected the cultural stresses and instabilities that followed World War II. **Blaxploitation** — a genre of low-budget films made in the early 1970s targeting urban, African American audiences and

featuring streetwise African American protagonists — developed against the background of turbulent race relations.

The popularity of many other genre films in the 1960s and 1970s depended on a recycling of formulas through other cultures and American social movements of the time. These revisionist genre films — like Robert Altman's western *McCabe and Mrs. Miller* (1971), in which the myth of the heroic western becomes violently redefined against the backdrop of the Vietnam War **[Figure 10.6]**, and Wim Wenders's German film noir *The American Friend* (1977), in which the Hollywood thriller becomes a lens through which to examine postwar Germany — often returned to the earlier conventions and icons with an ironic and self-conscious perspective on those formulas and their relation to a changing world.

10.6 ***McCabe and Mrs. Miller*** (1971). Robert Altman and other New Hollywood filmmakers offered revisionist takes on Hollywood genres like the western.

1970s–Present: New Hollywood, Sequels, and Global Genres

Jaws (1975) and *Star Wars* (1977) came in the middle of the era known as New Hollywood, with film-school-trained directors drawing on established genres, special effects, and large advertising budgets to create blockbusters. Video and foreign sales helped such movies generate worldwide business, and the new corporate entities that owned the studios relied heavily on sequels and franchises, like the *Star Wars* films, to guarantee repeat successes. *The Godfather: Part II* (1974), for example, deepened the saga of the Corleone Mafia family and was hailed as a masterpiece, and contemporary sequels like *The Fate of the Furious* (2017) and *Star Trek Beyond* (2016) combine characters and plot elements with new situations to deliver familiar entertainment **[Figure 10.7]**. Franchises such as the superhero films of the Marvel Cinematic Universe spread genre elements into other platforms, such as video games and virtual-reality themed experiences.

10.7 ***Star Trek Beyond*** (2016). Sequels and franchises cash in on the repetitive pleasures of genre formulas.

Increasingly, the commercial movie business centered not only on Hollywood. Hong Kong action films like John Woo's *The Killer* (1989) established a worldwide fan base by combining the successful national and regional genre of martial arts films with formulas of Hollywood action films, and they proved that films made outside Hollywood could be globally profitable. Bollywood films, characterized by their extravagant song-and-dance sequences and megastars, deepened their popularity beyond the Indian subcontinent and South Asian communities abroad by relying on the internet and DVD distribution. *Devdas* (2002), a spectacular romance about two young soulmates separated when young and doomed to live lives of unfulfilled love, became widely distributed and popular, especially in the United Kingdom and the United States **[Figure 10.8]**.

10.8 *Devdas* (2002). Internationally successful, this version of the frequently remade classic *Devdas* illustrates the successful globalization of national genres.

History renews some genres but also demands the invention of new ones. Because genre is always a historical negotiation, an awareness of the vicissitudes of cultural history makes movie genres more vital and meaningful. Recognizing those vicissitudes, however, also requires an understanding of the formal elements that define a particular genre.

The Elements of Film Genre

For a movie you have recently watched, identify the genre, and describe three conventions typically associated with this genre.

Genres identify group, social, or community activities that can be seen as in tension with the values of individual creativity and autonomy we associate with many art forms, including prestige and experimental films. A film may work creatively and individually within its genre, but the work must begin within the framework of acknowledged conventions and formulas that audiences expect. Our recognition of these formulas represents a bond between film producers and audiences, determining in large part how we see and understand a film. Film genres thus describe a kind of social contract that allows us to see a film as part of both a historical evolution and a cultural community. For instance, the western, recognizable by scenes of open plains and lone cowboys, engages a version of U.S. history and "how the West was won" that is understood and contested by audiences in different ways and to different ends over time [Figures 10.9a and 10.9b].

(a) (b)

10.9 The western film genre: (a) *My Darling Clementine* (1946) and **(b) *Johnny Guitar*** (1954). Genres represent a bond between filmmakers and audiences that must be renegotiated by each genre film. One western may meet expectations about cowboys in gunfights, and another may realign those expectations by placing women at the center of the story's action.

Description
The first still from the movie, My Darling Clementine, shows a cowboy with a pistol in-hand walking on a dirt road. The second still, from the movie Johnny Guitar, shows two cowgirls with two male companions at a counter.

Conventions

The most conspicuous dimensions of film genres are the conventions, formulas, and expectations through which we identify certain genres and distinguish them from others. Generic conventions are properties or features that identify a genre, such as character types, settings, props, or events that are repeated from

film to film. In westerns, cowboys often travel alone; in crime films, a seductive woman often foils the hard-boiled detective. Generic conventions also include **iconography** — images or image patterns with specific connotations or meanings. Dark alleys and smoky bars are staple images in crime movies. The world of the theater and entertainment industry is frequently the setting for musicals, from *Lullaby of Broadway* (1951) to *Rock of Ages* (2012), which revolves around a sleazy 1980s rock club.

These conventions and iconographies sometimes contain larger meanings and connotations that align them with social and cultural **archetypes** — that is, spiritual, psychological, or cultural models expressing certain virtues, values, or timeless realities. For example, a flood is an archetype used in some disaster films to represent the end of a corrupt life and the beginning of a new spiritual life, such as in Peter Weir's *The Last Wave* (1977), with its ominous visions of a tidal wave that, according to the Aboriginal people who predict it, will destroy Australia as part of a spiritual process **[Figure 10.10]**.

10.10 ***The Last Wave*** (1977). Archetypal imagery, such as the tidal wave shown here, underpins generic conventions.

TECHNOLOGY IN ACTION

Special Effects and Iconography in Science Fiction

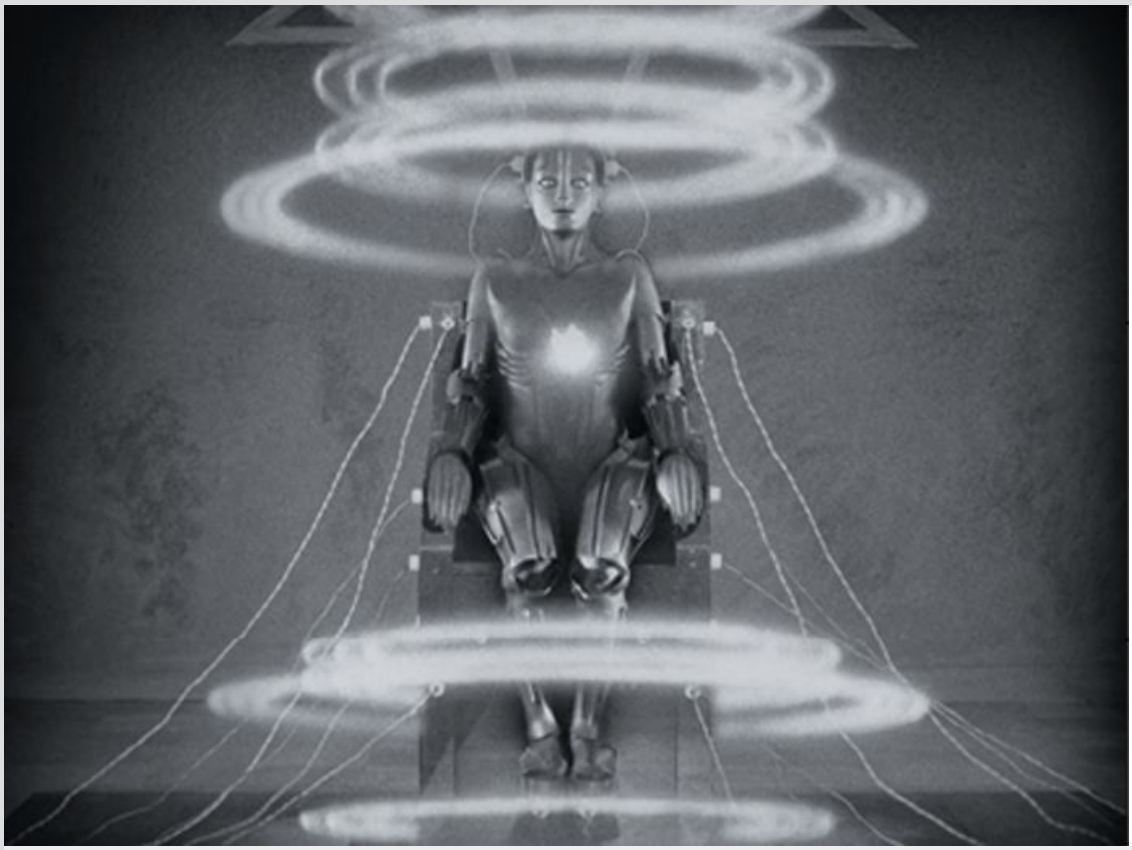
Visual iconography is crucial to distinguishing any genre film: think of the isolated cabin in a horror flick or the lone cowboy riding into the desert in a western. Special effects are central elements in the iconography of science fiction, in which spaceships, alien creatures, and futuristic technologies cue viewers that the physical and even moral laws of our own world are temporarily suspended.

Georges Méliès, one of the earliest filmmakers, pioneered both special effects and the science fiction genre itself in *Trip to the Moon* (1902) and numerous other films **[Figure 10.11a]**. To create effects like the famous image of a rocket landing in the moon's eye, Méliès stopped the camera, rearranged the mise-en-scène, and resumed filming to make things disappear or change shape. His repertoire also

included mechanical props, background paintings, and pyrotechnics, which became staples of the genre.

10.11a ***The Astronomer's Dream*** (1898). George Méliès's films helped establish both the science fiction genre and cinematic special effects.

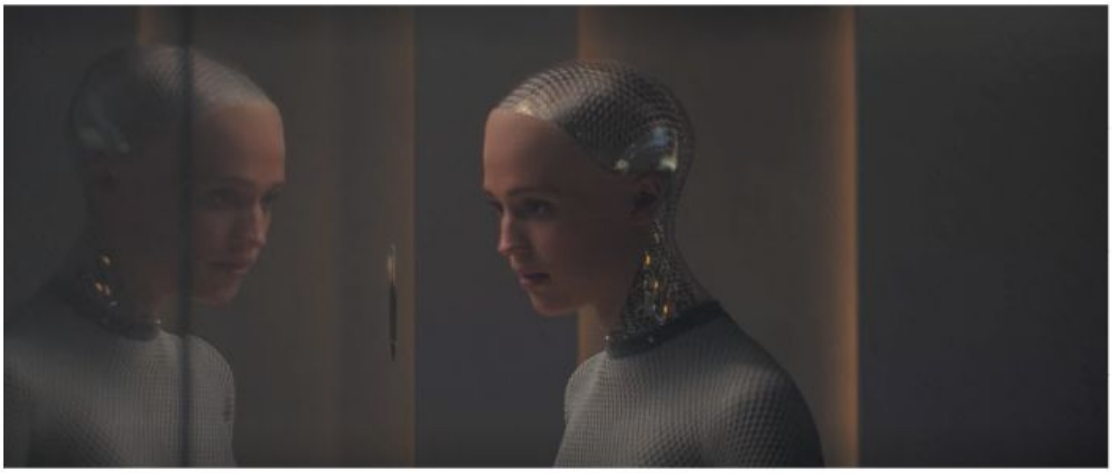
Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* (1927), with its futuristic sets and stark narrative of class conflict, is often considered the most influential science fiction film of all time. Cinematographer Eugen Schüfftan made the film's scale seem even greater by using mirrors to project actors into miniature sets in what became known as the Schüfftan effect. In the plot, the scientist Rotwang — in order to make the workers mistrust the woman who is urging their rebellion — designs a robot that takes on her features. While the scene of transformation is visually impressive, Brigitte Helm, who played the robot, complained that the iconic plaster suit was cumbersome and hard to move in **[Figure 10.11b]**.



10.11b *Metropolis* (1927). The iconic robot, called the *Maschinenmensch*, is a classic example of a common science fiction character type: the deceptive female android.

Since *Metropolis*, other science fiction films have explored the boundary between human and machine by associating the deceptions of technology with femininity. The iconography of the female human-machine hybrid has become ever more lifelike with advances in technology. In Alex Gardner's *Ex Machina* (2014), a tech visionary creates a robot named Ava who can pass the Turing test (designed by mathematician Alan Turing to tell if an intelligent machine is distinguishable from a human). Rather than using state-of the-art motion capture to generate a performance, visual effects supervisor Andrew Whitehurst digitally "painted" the robot design onto takes of Alicia Vikander acting. Ava appears metallic and translucent, but she has a human face **[Figure 10.11c]**. This portrayal is complex, not only in terms of visual effects, but also as a challenge to viewers, who may be unsure whether to fear Ava or root for her as she rebels against her male human creator. Through special effects, *Ex Machina* and other science fiction films

continue to explore the human encounter with the wonders of the machine that is at the heart of the movie experience.



10.11c ***Ex Machina*** (2014). This recent take on the female android uses special effects and a thought-provoking narrative to challenge viewers.

Formulas and Myths

When generic conventions are put in motion as part of a plot, they become generic formulas, the patterns for developing stories in a particular genre. Generic formulas used in a particular film can be arranged in a standard way or in a variation on the standard. With such horror films as Stanley Kubrick's *The Shining* (1980), we immediately recognize the beginning of one of these formulas: a couple decides to live alone with their child in a large, mysterious hotel in the mountains of Colorado and is snowed in during the long winter **[Figure 10.12]**. The rest of the formula proceeds as follows:

strange and disturbing events indicate that the house/hotel is haunted, and the haunting possesses the husband/father, leads to frightening visions, and begins to destroy the characters, who flee into the night.

10.12 ***The Shining*** (1980). Jack Nicholson plays a writer who suffers a mental breakdown within the walls of a deceptively peaceful Colorado hotel.

In some cases, these generic formulas also become associated with myths — spiritual and cultural stories that describe a defining action or event for a group of people or an entire community. All cultures have important myths that help secure a shared cultural identity.

One culture may celebrate a national event associated with a particular holiday, such as the Fourth of July in the United States, and another may see the birth and rise of a great hero from the past as the key to its cultural history. From *Patton* (1970) to *Malcolm X* (1992), historical epics often re-create an actual historical figure as a cultural myth in which the character's actions determine a national identity. In these cases, a U.S. army commander turns the tide of World War II, and an American Muslim minister serves as a central figure in the black power movement in the United States **[Figures 10.13a** and **10.13b]**.

(a)

(b)

10.13 Historical epics: (a) *Patton* (1970) and **(b) *Malcolm X*** (1992). Historical epics often use a heroic figure to build a national myth.

Description

The first still shows a close-up of the main protagonists from the movie Patton, giving a military salute. The second shows Malcolm X.

Meanwhile, science fiction films, such as Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968), frequently recount explorations or inventions that violate the laws of nature or the spiritual world. The genre's narrative formulas often relate to broader myths, such as the Faustian myth of selling one's soul for knowledge and power or the story of Adam and Eve's eating from the tree of knowledge and their subsequent punishment.

Audience Expectations

Triggered by a film's promotion or by the film itself, generic expectations inform viewers' experiences while watching a film, helping them anticipate the meaning of the movie's conventions and formulas. Thus a narrative's beginning, characters, or setting can cue certain expectations about the genre that the film then satisfies or frustrates. The beginning of *Jaws* (1975), in which an unidentified young woman swims alone at night in a dark and ominous ocean, leads viewers to anticipate shock and danger, participate in the unfolding of the genre, and respond to any surprises this particular film may offer. In *Jaws*, much of the ensuing plot takes place on a sunny beach and open ocean, rather than in the darkened, confined houses of the usual horror film, which is a clever variation that keeps the formula fresh and viewers' expectations attentive. The

opening scene of *Dark Waters* (2019), a story of the environmental consequences of corporate malfeasance, opens with trespassing teens swimming at night. The allusion to *Jaws* links the drama of a lawyer's dogged efforts to prove wrongdoing to the horror genre.

VIEWING CUE

Reflect on a film trailer you have seen recently. Based on the generic expectations triggered by the trailer, what conventions or narrative formulas could you expect in the film itself?

Generic expectations underscore the important role played by viewers in determining a genre and the ways that this role connects genres to a specific social, cultural, or national environment. Partly because of Hollywood's global reach and the extensive group of genre films it has produced, most audiences around the world will, for instance, quickly recognize the cues for a western. Non-Hollywood genres may not generate such clear expectations outside their native culture. Generic expectations triggered by a martial arts film were long familiar in China when *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* introduced the flying battles of the *wuxia* genre to a wide American audience in 2000. Likewise, the religious films, or *cine de sacerdotes*, familiar to Spanish audiences of the 1940s and 1950s, are likely to go unrecognized by viewers from other cultures **[Figure 10.14]**.

Collection Christophel/Alamy.

10.14 ***Viridiana*** (1961). Reactions to Luis Buñuel's film, which satirizes the Catholic Church, vary according to audience members' familiarity with the particular genre of religious films it

attacks.

Even within a culture, the popularity of certain genres depends on shifting audience tastes and expectations over time. Movie producers' beliefs about which films audiences will pay to see reflect historical and social conditions and also a genre's ability to assimilate those conditions. For example, musicals proliferated in the 1930s because they offered audiences an easy escape from the anxieties of the Depression through the new technologies of synchronous sound. Film noir crime films flourished in the 1940s and early 1950s during and in the wake of the social upheavals of World War II. U.S. science fiction films had their heyday in the 1950s, when films like *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (1951) packaged and mythologized fears about political and other invasions as concrete aliens and monsters that could be confronted and understood **[Figure 10.15]**. Audience expectations signal the social vitality of a particular genre, but that vitality changes as genres move from culture to culture or evolve across historical periods within a single culture. In this sense, genres can tell us a great deal about community or national identity.

10.15 ***The Day the Earth Stood Still*** (1951). Science fiction films were popular in the Cold War era.

Film genres represent, in short, a social contract between filmmakers and their audiences, a contract in which each side recognizes a common language of conventions, formulas, and expectations. Because genres typically reflect historical and cultural contexts, these contracts give rise to different genres at different times and in different places. From comedies to crime films, film genres act out, mediate, and elaborate the pertinent myths and rituals that inform our lives.

Six Movie Genres

From their first days, movies were organized as genres according to subject matter — films about a famous person, panoramic views, and so on. As movies became more sophisticated, however, genres grew into more complex narrative organizations with recognizable formal conventions.

Assembling a list of movie genres can be more daunting and uncertain than it appears. Genres are a product of a perspective that groups together individual movies, sometimes in many different ways. For some scholars or viewers, for instance, film noir is an important movie genre that surfaced in the 1940s, whereas for others, it is less a film genre than a style that appears in multiple genres of the period. Moreover, a particular genre designation may encompass too much or too little: comedies might appear too grand a category for some critics, and screwball comedies may seem too limited a group to be termed a genre. Two terms are helpful when trying to understand the multiple combinations and subdivisions of genres. **Hybrid genres** are mixed forms created through the interaction of different genres to produce fusions, such as musical horror films like *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* (1975) **[Figure 10.16]**. **Subgenres** are specific versions of a genre denoted by an adjective — for example, the spaghetti western (produced in Italy) or the slapstick comedy. Genres can be understood as constellations in

which individual examples can overlap and shift their shape depending on their relation to other genres. In some contexts, understanding *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* in the context of other cult films may be more illuminating than relating it to comedic or horror conventions.

10.16 ***The Rocky Horror Picture Show*** (1975). A hybrid of horror film and musical comedy genres, this film also shares characteristics with other cult films.

VIEWING CUE

Think back to a film you saw recently. Can you identify it as a particular hybrid or subgenre?

Hybrid genres and subgenres show the complexity of genres as constellations, building on distinctions among major genres. Here we focus on six important groupings of films that are generally talked about as genres — comedies, westerns, melodramas, musicals, horror films, and crime films. We aim to define each genre as it has appeared in different cultures and at different points in history and as its social contract changes with different audiences. We also highlight a selection of defining characteristics for each genre, including the following:

- the distinguishing features of the characters, narrative, and visual style
- the reflection of social rituals in the genre
- the production of certain historical hybrids or subgenres out of the generic paradigm

Although these generic blueprints inevitably will be reductive and at times overlap, mapping each of these paradigms can guide our explorations of specific films and how they engage their audiences.

Comedies

Film **comedies** have flourished since the invention of cinema in 1895, as comic actors took their talents to the screen where they could be appreciated even without synchronized sound. This film genre celebrates the harmony and resiliency of social life, typically with a narrative that ends happily and an emphasis on episodes or

"gags" over plot continuity. Rooted in the *commedia dell'arte*, Punch and Judy, and the vaudeville stage acts that produced Buster Keaton and a host of other early comedians, film comedy is one of the first and most enduring of film genres. Its many variations can be condensed into these main traits:

- central characters who often are defined by distinctive physical features, such as body shape and size, costuming, or manner of speaking
- narratives that emphasize episodes or "gags" more than plot continuity or progression and that usually conclude happily
- theatrical acting styles in which characters physically and playfully interact with the mise-en-scène that surrounds them

From the 1920s comedies of producer Mack Sennett to the awkward and stumbling Woody Allen as Alvy Singer in *Annie Hall* (1977), comic figures stand out physically because of their body type, facial expressions, and characteristic gestures. Although comedies can develop intricate plots, their focus is usually on individual vignettes. In Sennett's *Saturday Afternoon* (1926), Harry Langdon balances between moving cars and hangs from telephone poles **[Figure 10.17]**. In *Annie Hall*, Alvy jumps around a kitchen chasing lobsters and later squirms at a family dinner table where he imagines himself perceived by others as a Hasidic Jew. In these episodic encounters, the comic world becomes a stage full of unpredictable gags and theatrical possibilities.

10.17 ***Saturday Afternoon*** (1926). Classic silent comedies, such as this Mack Sennett film, depend on physical gags.

Comedies celebrate the harmony and resiliency of social life. Although many viewers associate comedies with laughs and humor, comedy is more fundamentally about social reconciliation and the triumph of the physical over the intellectual. In comic narratives, obstacles or antagonists — in homes, marriages, communities, and nations — are overcome or dismissed by the physical dexterity or verbal wit of a character or perhaps by luck, good timing, or magic. In *Bringing Up Baby* (1938), Katharine Hepburn is a flighty socialite who moves and talks so fast that she bewilders the verbally and

physically bumbling paleontologist Cary Grant, who forsakes his scientific priorities for the joys of an improbable romance with her. In *Groundhog Day* (1993), Bill Murray plays a weatherman with many social and professional flaws who falls into a magical world where he relives the day again and again, with the ability to correct his previous errors and romantic blunders. In *Bridesmaids* (2011), anxieties and conflicts between two women friends erupt around the impending marriage of one of them, but after a series of slapstick misunderstandings and fallouts, they rediscover their bond **[Figure 10.18]**.

10.18 ***Bridesmaids*** (2011). Within the tensions and transitions of an upcoming wedding, Annie and Lillian remake themselves and their relationship as a comedic reconciliation.

Perhaps the most obvious convention in comedies is the happy ending, in which couples or individuals are united in the form of a family unit or the promise of one to come. Traditional comedies often begin with some discord or disruption in social life or in the

relationship between two people (lovers are separated or angry, for instance), but after various trials or misunderstandings, harmony is restored and individuals are united. In the romantic comedy *The Proposal* (2009), for example, a demanding boss asks her male assistant to marry her so she can avoid deportation back to Canada. Despite their mutual annoyance with the arrangement, they comically struggle to maintain the sham engagement at a visit to his family home in Alaska, only to fall in love in the end **[Figure 10.19]**.

10.19 ***The Proposal*** (2009). Comic resiliency ultimately brings a seemingly mismatched couple together.

Historically, as the Hollywood film comedy responded to audience expectations in changing contexts, the genre itself endured numerous permutations and structural changes. Three salient subgenres emerged as a result — slapstick comedies, screwball comedies, and romantic comedies.

Slapstick Comedies

Slapstick comedies, marked by their physical humor and stunts, comprised some of the first narrative films. In the 1910s, the initial versions of this subgenre used printed intertitles rather than spoken dialogue and ran from a few minutes to about fifteen minutes in length. Early films like those of Mack Sennett's Keystone Kops revolved around physical stunts set within fairly restricted social spaces.

By the 1920s, comedy had integrated its gags and physical actions into feature-length films with more elaborate narratives. Still, the slapstick moments stand out, like the scene in *The General* (1927) when Buster Keaton misfires a cannon vertically into the air. The cannonball fortuitously misses him and just happens to destroy an enemy bridge. Slapstick comedies reemerged in the 1980s with films such as *Porky's* (1982) and *Police Academy* (1984). The ingenuity of physical comedy combined with scatological and sexual jokes in these films targeted at young male audiences. In *Monty Python's The Meaning of Life* (1983) and *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* (1975), slapstick becomes an ingredient of nonstop social satire. Today the genre is popular again, featuring comic stars such as Will Ferrell in *Daddy's Home* (2015) and Melissa McCarthy in *Spy* (2015) **[Figure 10.20]** and *The Boss* (2016). For female stars in particular — from Mabel Normand in the silent-era comedy to Lucille Ball's success on

television — the unruly physicality of slapstick allowed them to break out of confined social roles.

10.20 ***Spy*** (2015). Slapstick comedy has reinvented itself for new audiences, often through exaggerated physical humor, bizarre dialogue, and unconventional protagonists.

Screwball Comedies

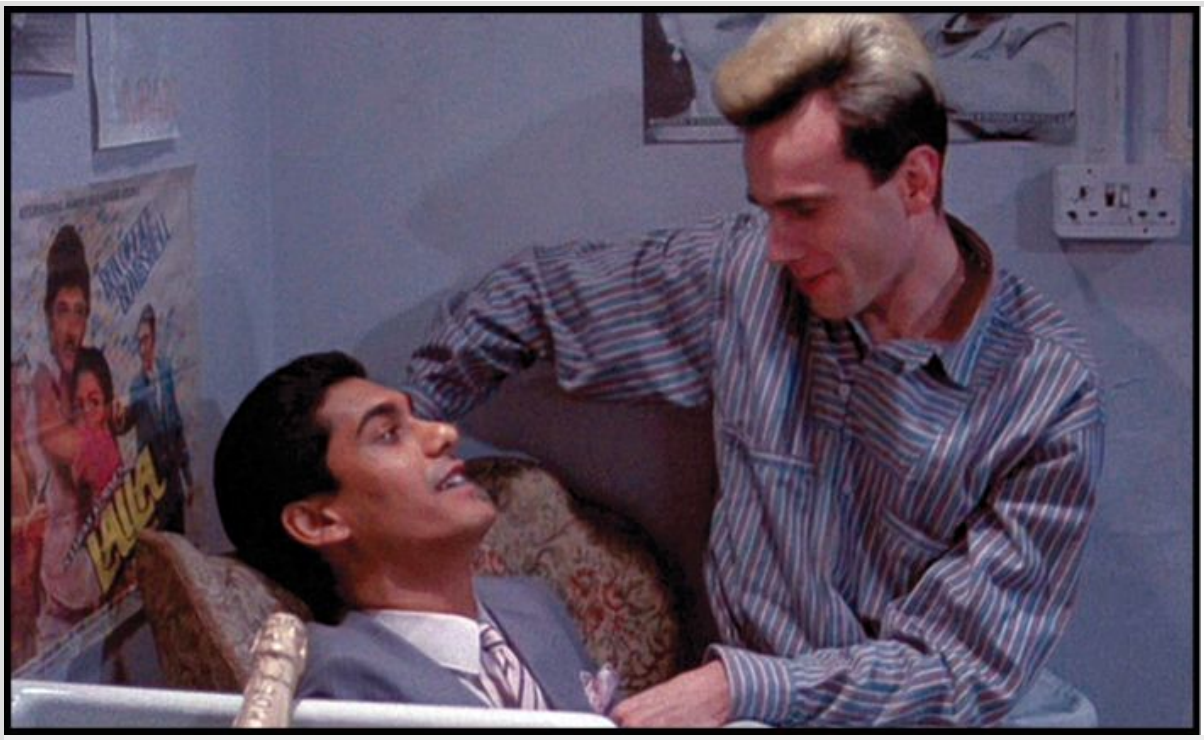
In the 1930s and 1940s, **screwball comedies** transformed the humor of the physical into fast-talking verbal gymnastics and unpredictable action, arguably displacing sexual energy to barbed verbal exchanges between men and women when the Production Code barred more direct expression. In effect, these films usually redirected the comic focus from the individual clown to the confused heterosexual couple. *It Happened One Night* (1934), *Bringing Up Baby* (1938), *His Girl Friday* (1940), and *The Philadelphia Story* (1940) are among the best-known examples of screwball comedies. Each features independent women who resist, mock, and challenge

the crusty rules of their social worlds. When the right man arrives or returns — one who can match these women in charm and physical and verbal skills — confrontation leads to love. Focused on the nonstop chatter and quirkiness of its heroine, *Miss Pettigrew Lives for a Day* (2008) revives some elements of this formula and its pleasures.

Romantic Comedies

In **romantic comedies**, humor takes second place to the happy ending. Popular since the 1930s and 1940s, romantic comedies like *Small Town Girl* (1936), *The Shop Around the Corner* (1940), and *Adam's Rib* (1949) concentrate on the emotional attraction of a heterosexual couple in a consistently lighthearted manner. This subgenre draws attention to a peculiar or awkward social predicament (in *Adam's Rib*, for example, the husband and wife lawyers oppose each other in the courtroom) that eventually will be overcome by romance on the way to a happy ending. More recent examples of the "rom-com," as the genre has come to be known, include Nora Ephron's *You've Got Mail* (a 1998 remake of Ernst Lubitsch's *The Shop Around the Corner*), where the comic predicaments have contemporary twists — email and instant messaging replace the letters of the first version — but the formula and conventions remain fairly consistent. Stephen Frears's romantic comedy *My Beautiful Laundrette* (1985), however, suggests the range of possibilities in the creative and even political reworking of genre. In this case, the social complications include a wildly dysfunctional Pakistani family in London and the romance

that blossoms between the entrepreneurial son and a white man who is his childhood friend and a former right-wing punk [Figure 10.21].



10.21 ***My Beautiful Laundrette*** (1985). Director Stephen Frears and writer Hanif Kureishi update the romantic comedy genre to tell an interracial gay love story against a backdrop of violence aimed at immigrants in 1980s Britain.

Westerns

Westerns are a staple of Hollywood and perhaps its most distinctive genre, associated by audiences around the world with America through its distinctive landscape and settler colonial history. Their popularity has waxed and waned in different historical periods, often tied to anxieties about national identity and legitimacy. Set in

the American West, these films typically feature rugged individualist white male characters on a quest or dramas of frontier life and justify the historical treatment of Native Americans through hostile representations. The genre grew out of late-nineteenth-century dime novels, journalistic accounts, and performances that mythologized manifest destiny and the wild American West **[Figure 10.22]**. The depiction of a range of Native American cultures, the history of the region before white settlers, the appropriation of native lands, and the role of immigrant and female labor in western expansion is typically subordinated to stories of white male heroism.

10.22 ***Buffalo Bill's Wild West*** (1899). At the end of the nineteenth century, William Cody's adventures as an army scout were reenacted in dime novels, stage melodramas, and his

wildly popular show, establishing cowboy iconography for movie westerns to build on.

Description
The poster title reads:"Buffalo Bill's Wild West - And Congress of Rough Riders of the World. A Company of Wild West Cowboys."

The film western began to take shape in the first years of the movie industry as a kind of travelogue of a recent but now-lost historical period. From *The Great Train Robbery* (1903) to *The Revenant* (2015), the western has grown into a surprisingly complex genre while also retaining its fundamental elements:

- characters, almost always male, whose physical and mental toughness separate them from the crowds of modern civilization
- narratives that follow some version of a quest into the natural world
- a stylistic emphasis on open, natural spaces and settings, such as the western frontier regions of the United States

John Wayne as the Ringo Kid in *Stagecoach* (1939) has a physical energy and determination that is echoed by Paul Newman and Robert Redford as *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* (1969) **[Figure 10.23]**. Never at ease with the law or the restrictions of civilization, these men find themselves on vague searches for justice, peace, adventure, freedom, and perhaps treasure, which would offer them

all these rewards. Quests through wide-open canyons and deserts seem at once to threaten, inspire, and humble these western heroes.

10.23 ***Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*** (1969). Paul Newman and Robert Redford incarnate western heroes for audiences in the 1960s.

In the prototypical western, through the trials of a lone protagonist, rugged individualism becomes the measure of any social relationship and of the values of most western communities. Even when they are part of a gang, as in *The Magnificent Seven* (1960), these individuals are usually loners or mavericks rather than representative leaders. More than in historical epics, violent confrontations are central to these narratives. This violence, even when it is directed against Native Americans, is measured primarily by the ability and will of the individual rather than the systemic violence of the mass, nation, or community. In *High Plains Drifter* (1973), the moody Clint Eastwood must protect a frightened town from the vengeance of outlaws. When a violent showdown concerns

two groups — as in the gunfight at the O.K. Corral between the Earps and the Clantons in John Ford's *My Darling Clementine* (1946) — the battle is often about individual justice or revenge (of sons and brothers) or about who has the rightful claims to the frontier.

However, the western can also reflect ambivalence and even challenges toward individualism and the use of violence. In John Ford's *The Searchers* (1956), the racism of the central character played by John Wayne is portrayed as pathological, and in the same director's *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* (1962), the heroic myth of the American West is exposed as a lie. In addition, like most film genres, westerns have responded to changing audiences. During the early twentieth century, they were popular among the mass audiences of early cinema and associated with popular forms such as Wild West shows. With a few exceptions, westerns were not a particularly respected genre in the 1920s and early 1930s, but they returned to popularity during the 1950s, with widescreen color technologies and the Cold War's redrawn opposition of good and evil. Over time, three hybrids or subgenres have distinguished the western — the epic western, the existential western, and the revisionist western.

Epic Westerns

The **epic western** concentrates on action and movement and develops a heroic character whose quests and battles serve to define

the nation and its myths of origin. With its roots in literature and epic paintings, this genre appears early and often in film history, foregrounding the spectacle of open land and beautiful scenery. An early instance of the epic, *The Covered Wagon* (1923), follows a wagon train of settlers into the harsh but breathtaking frontier, where their fortitude and determination establish the expanding spirit of America. Years later, *Dances with Wolves* (1990) describes a more complex struggle for national identity as a traumatized Civil War veteran allies himself with Native Americans [Figure 10.24].

10.24 ***Dances with Wolves*** (1990). Kevin Costner plays a sympathetic Civil War veteran who aligns himself with Native Americans in this epic western.

Existential Westerns

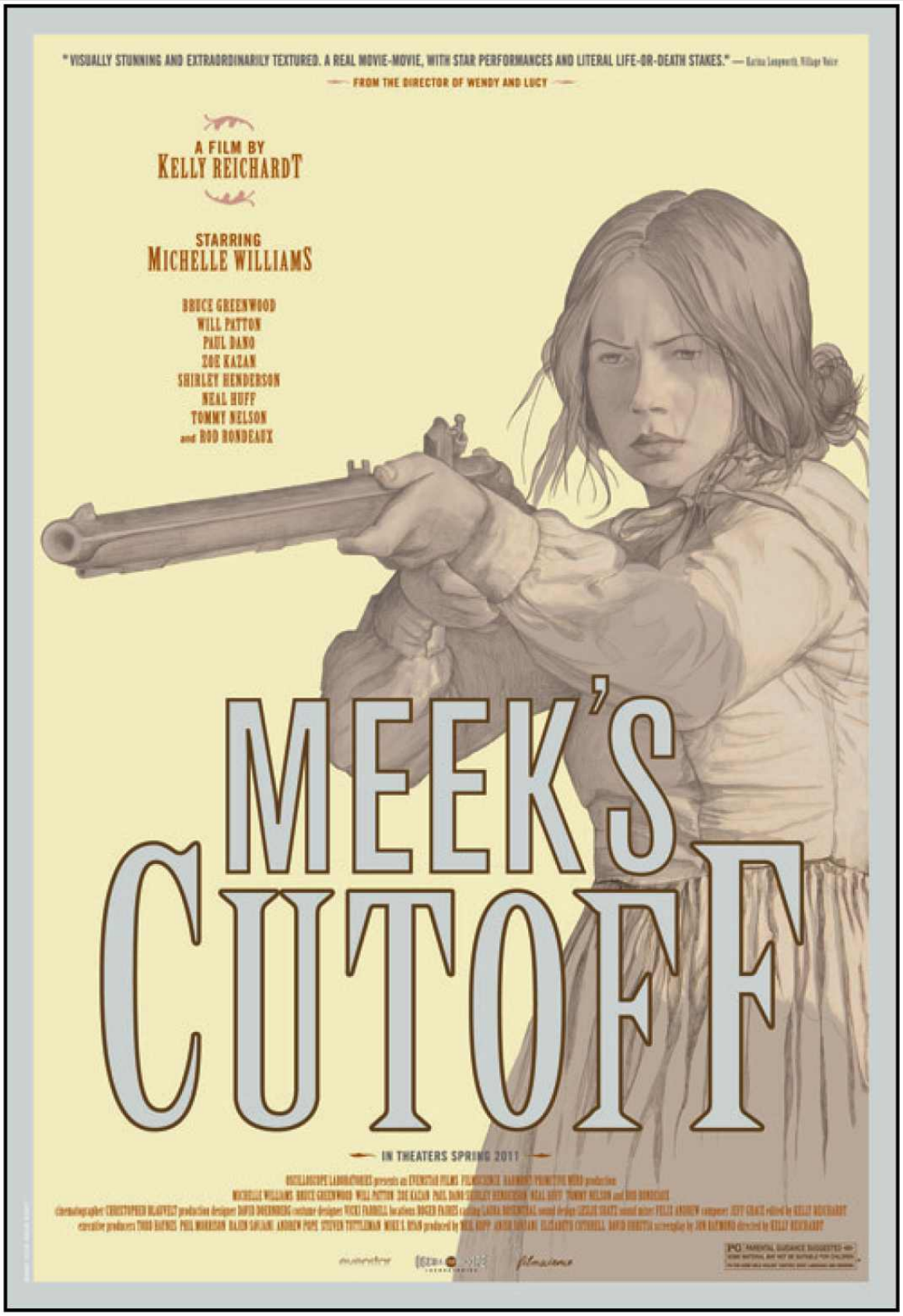
In the 1950s, one of the most interesting decades for westerns, the existential western took shape. In this introspective subgenre, the traditional western hero is troubled by his changing social status

and his self-doubts, often as the frontier becomes more populated and civilized. *The Furies* (1950), *Shane* (1953), *Johnny Guitar* (1954), and *The Left-Handed Gun* (1958) are existential westerns with protagonists who are troubled in their sense of purpose. The traditionally male domain of the West is now contested by women, evil is harder to locate and usually more insidious, and the encroachment of society complicates life and suggests the end of the cowboy lifestyle. In a notable return to the questions raised by this subgenre, *Unforgiven* (1992), the formerly unbendable Clint Eastwood is now financially strapped, somewhat hypocritical, and disturbingly aware that killing is an ugly business. With striking realism, the independent film *The Rider* (2017) hints at the existential questions confronting an injured rodeo cowboy who is no longer able to ride **[Figure 10.25]**. Brady Jandreau, a member of the Lakota Sioux tribe, plays a character based on himself.

10.25 ***The Rider*** (2017). Shot on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation and with nonprofessional cast members playing characters based on themselves, Chloé Zhao's film poses the existential question of a cowboy who can no longer ride.

Revisionist Westerns

By the 1960s and 1970s, the introspection of the existential western was overshadowed by foregrounding ideology and politics. **Revisionist westerns** look at the most basic assumptions of the western, sometimes undermining assumptions of heroism and historical justice and sometimes depicting people and realities marginalized in the mythologies. With only communities rather than frontiers to conquer in *The Wild Bunch* (1969), aging cowboys are less interested in justice and freedom than in indiscriminate and grotesque killing. In more recent films such as *There Will Be Blood* (2007), *No Country for Old Men* (2007), and *Once Upon a Time … in Hollywood* (2019), contemporary directors invoke conventional motifs and icons of violence and conquest in more horrifying and exaggerated forms than ever before. In *Posse* (1993), Mario Van Peebles directs and stars as the leader of a band of African American soldiers seeking justice. Kelly Reichardt's *Meek's Cutoff* (2010) portrays the potentially epic subject matter of settlers traveling the Oregon trail as exhausting and monotonous, showing a pioneer woman's conflicts as the small party she is with loses its way **[Figure 10.26]**.



Poster Design and Drawing: Marlene McCarty. Courtesy Oscilloscope Laboratories.

10.26 *Meek's Cutoff* (2010). Revisionist westerns have highlighted the experiences of Native Americans, immigrants, and women in the actual history of the American West. This one also challenges the western's narrative form and iconography.

Melodramas

Movie **melodramas** have clearly identifiable moral types and feature coincidences and reversals of fortune, using music to underscore the action. Melodrama is one of the more difficult genres to define because melodramatic characters and actions can be part of many other kinds of movies. The word itself indicates a combination of the intensities of music (*melos*) and the interaction of human conflicts (*drama*). Indebted to a nineteenth-century theatrical heritage portraying social and domestic oppression in the form of heightened emotional dramas, melodramas arrived virtually simultaneously with the first developments in film narrative. The definition developed by film scholars includes these fundamental formulas and conventions:

VIEWING CUE

Watch a clip from *The Searchers* (1956) online. Which characteristics of this genre are most apparent in its iconography? How does this sequence use these generic elements in its own way?

- characters who are defined by their situation or basic traits rather than by their deeds or complexity and who struggle, often desperately, to express their feelings or emotions
- narratives that rely on coincidences and reversals and build toward emotional or physical climaxes
- a visual style that emphasizes emotion or elemental struggles, whether in interior scenes and close-ups or in action tableaux

From D. W. Griffith's *Way Down East* (1920) to Kimberly Peirce's *Boys Don't Cry* (1999), the central character is restrained, repressed, or victimized by more powerful forces of society. These forces may pit a dominating masculinity against a weaker femininity. In Griffith's film, a city villain threatens an innocent virgin, and in *Boys Don't Cry*, Nebraska youth assault and murder Brandon Teena when they discover that he was assigned female at birth (named Teena

Brandon). In the first film, claustrophobic rooms dramatize this victimization [Figure 10.27], until a climactic chase over a frozen river brings the conflict between good and evil outside for the world to witness. In the second, medium shots and close-ups of the protagonist emphasize the strains and contradictions of identity [Figure 10.28]. In each of these films, true to the conventions of melodrama, the story reaches a breaking point with the threat of death: one character almost drifts away on ice floes, and the other is sexually assaulted and killed.

10.27 ***Way Down East*** (1920). Claustrophobic interiors represent the melodramatic heroine's victimization.

10.28 ***Boys Don't Cry*** (1999). Melodrama relies on close-ups to tell stories of contested identity — here the protagonist's expression of gender.

As with westerns, individualism and private life anchor this genre, but the drama is not about conquering a frontier and finding a home but rather about feeling emotional strains and often failing to act or speak out within an already established home, family, or community. Melodramas thus develop a conflict between interior emotions and exterior restrictions, between yearning or loss and satisfaction or renewal. Women are typically at the center of melodrama, illustrating how women historically have been excluded from or limited in their access to public powers of expression.

Mise-en-scène and narrative space also play a major stylistic role in melodrama. For example, in Griffith's films, individuals, usually female, retreat into smaller and smaller private spaces while some

obvious or implied hostile force, often male, threatens and drives them further into a desperate internal sanctuary. These rituals are often graphically acted out. In Elia Kazan's film version of *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1951), Blanche and Stella, confined in a run-down, claustrophobic apartment in New Orleans, also confine and repress their memories of a lost family history; their desires to escape are channeled through their sexuality. For Stella, that means accepting her husband Stanley's violent control of her; for Blanche, it means becoming a victim of Stanley's power and, after he rapes her, madness.

Early melodramas depicted female distress and entrapment in time and space, but those formulas have grown subtler, or at least more realistic, over the years. Three subgenres of melodramas that usually overlap and rarely appear in complete isolation from one another can be distinguished — physical, family, and social melodramas.

Physical Melodramas

Physical melodramas focus on the material conditions that control the protagonist's desires and emotions. These physical restrictions may be related to the places and people that surround that person or may be a product of the person's size or other bodily attribute. One of the first great film melodramas, D. W. Griffith's *Broken Blossoms* (1919), is also one of the most grisly. In an atmosphere of drugs,

violence, and poverty, a brutal boxer, Battling Burrows, hounds and physically terrifies his unwanted and frail daughter, Lucy, until a kind Chinese man shelters her and falls in love with her, with fatal consequences. Although most melodramas do not definitively emphasize the physical plight of the heroine, viewers can recognize this generic focus on bodily or material strain in melodramas such as *Dark Victory* (1939), about a woman with a terminal brain illness, and *Magnificent Obsession* (1954), about a blind woman whose vision is ultimately restored. *Black Swan* (2010) might be best understood as a contemporary variation on physical melodrama concerned with female identity, bodily control, and the eruption of violence **[Figure 10.29]**.

10.29 ***Black Swan*** (2010). Set in the world of ballet, this film is a melodrama about physical and sexual repression, as Nina battles pressures from her mother, her director, and herself to become the "perfect" Swan Queen.

Family Melodramas

Although physical arrangements play a part in them, **family melodramas** focus on the psychological and gendered forces restricting individuals within the family. For many viewers, this is the quintessential form of melodrama, in which women and young people, especially, must struggle against patriarchal authority, economic dependency, and confining gender roles. In Douglas Sirk's *Written on the Wind* (1956), a Texas millionaire marries a beautiful but naive secretary and then tortures himself wondering whether the baby they are expecting is his or his best friend's — the man she should have married. The corruption and confusion of this household grow more intense and manic through the constant baiting and manipulations of a sister whose restlessness is expressed as sexual promiscuity.

The family melodrama came to prominence in the 1950s as gender and familial roles were being redefined, and later examples often speak to similar social shifts. In *Ordinary People* (1980), an outwardly prosperous family is emotionally crippled by the loss of one son, the mother's withdrawal of affection from the other, and the father's powerlessness. In Matt Ross's *Captain Fantastic* (2016), the melodrama occurs at the intersections of a survivalist family whose father must deal with the death of the children's mother and the crisis of the family adapting to a world outside the Oregon woods **[Figure 10.30]**.

10.30 *Captain Fantastic* (2016). A family of extraordinary outsiders must reshape itself under the pressures of a different "normal" world.

Social Melodramas

Social melodramas extend the crises of the family to include larger historical, community, and economic issues. In these films, the losses, sufferings, and frustrations of the protagonist are visibly part of social or national politics. Earlier melodramas fit this subgenre. For example, John Stahl's *Imitation of Life* (1934), remade by Douglas Sirk in 1959, makes the family melodrama inseparable from larger issues of racism as a black daughter passes for white. Contemporary melodramas also commonly explore social and political dimensions of personal conflicts. When a father is kidnapped in Steve McQueen's *12 Years a Slave* (2013), the harmony and happiness of an African American family from Saratoga, New York, are shattered by and intimately linked to the brutality and horrors of slavery in mid-nineteenth-century America **[Figure 10.31]**. In *Brokeback Mountain*

(2005), male lovers are kept apart by social conventions as well as possibly generic ones, as cowboys are not usually shown falling in love with each other [Figure 10.32].

10.31 ***12 Years a Slave*** (2013). This searing melodrama about a father snatched from his family becomes an emotional and personal depiction of the brutalities of slavery in the nineteenth century.

10.32 ***Brokeback Mountain*** (2005). This political melodrama depicts male lovers kept apart by social and generic conventions.

Musicals

As noted in Chapter 6, when synchronous sound came to the cinema in 1927, the film industry quickly embraced the new technology and moved to integrate music and song into the stories. Precedents for film **musicals** range from traditional opera to vaudeville and musical theater, in which songs either supported or punctuated the story. Since the first musicals, the following have been their most common components:

- characters who act out and express their emotions and thoughts through song and dance
- plots interrupted or moved forward by musical numbers
- spectacular sets and settings (such as Broadway theaters, fairs, and dramatic social or grand natural backgrounds) or animated environments

In *Gold Diggers of 1933* (1933) and *The Sound of Music* (1965), groups of characters escape the complexities of Depression-era society and Nazi encroachment into Austria, respectively, by breaking into song **[Figure 10.33]**. Whether on a Broadway stage or against the beauty of an Alpine setting, characters in musicals speak their hearts and minds most articulately through music and dance.

10.33 ***The Sound of Music*** (1965). The Nazi threat cannot dampen the spirit expressed through song.

As social markers, musicals are the flip side of melodramas, highlighting the joy of expression rather than the pain of repression. With musicals, the tearful cries of melodrama give way to the beautiful articulations of music. Both focus on personal emotions, but in musicals, song and dance become the longed-for vehicles for the repressed and inexpressible emotions of the melodrama. There are romantic crises, social problems, and physical dangers in the narrative, but in most cases, difficulties can be remedied or at least put into perspective by the immediacy of song, music, and dance. With more plot than most musicals, *West Side Story* (1961) features all the tragedy and violence found in Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* (on which it is based) and a social commentary on Puerto Rican and white relationships in New York: gangs fight, lovers are separated, and horrible deaths happen. But even during the most troubling

situations, song and dance transform battle cries into gaiety ("The Jet Song") **[Figure 10.34]**, patriotic idealism into comic satire ("America"), and even a tragic death into a peaceful vision ("Somewhere"). Julie Taymor's *Across the Universe* (2007) **[Figure 10.35]**, similarly rich with narrative, weaves together the stories of several characters living in New York City during the turbulent 1960s. Musical enactments of Beatles songs express the "free love" spirit and the darker, politically charged moments of the decade.

10.34 ***West Side Story*** (1961). Social antagonisms are expressed through song and dance.

10.35 ***Across the Universe*** (2007). Beatles songs are reimagined as wild production numbers with a music-video influence.

After the first feature-length musical, *The Jazz Singer* (1927), musicals adapted to reflect different cultural predicaments. Of the many types of musicals, we can identify three subgenres — theatrical, integrated, and animated musicals. Many examples of each subgenre are adaptations of Broadway musicals or other theatrical sources.

Theatrical Musicals

No doubt the best-known films of the musical genre are **theatrical musicals**, which situate the musical convention onstage or "backstage." Here it is unmistakable that the fantasy and art of the theater supersede the reality of the street. One of the finest early musicals is *42nd Street* (1933), which is partly about the complicated love lives of its characters — a Broadway director who wants one last

hit play; the starlet Dorothy Brock, who juggles lovers offstage; and the chorus girl Peggy Sawyer, who substitutes for the star and saves the show. What ultimately gathers together all these hopes and conflicts is the musical show itself. Through the remarkable choreography of Busby Berkeley and hit tunes like "Shuffle Off to Buffalo," jealousies and doubts turn into a spectacular celebration of life on Broadway **[Figure 10.36]**.

10.36 ***42nd Street*** (1933). The "Shuffle Off to Buffalo" number is presented as part of a Broadway show, which acts as the central mise-en-scène of the narrative.

Although theatrical musicals later waned in popularity, *All That Jazz* (1979) resurrected this subgenre as an exaggerated and even self-indulgent staging of the autobiography of choreographer Bob Fosse. *Dreamgirls* (2006) dramatizes the story of Motown, while smaller-scale musicals like *God Help the Girl* (2014) **[Figure 10.37]** and *Sing Street* (2016) apply theatrical techniques to stories about young people in rock bands, blurring the line between theatrical musicals and more everyday settings.

10.37 *God Help the Girl* (2014). This modern musical is set in the indie music scene rather than backstage, and instead of production numbers, the musical sections more closely resemble homemade music videos, fading in and out of fantasy.

Integrated Musicals

Musicals that incorporate musical numbers into the film's narrative are known as **integrated musicals**. Here the idyllic and redemptive moments of song and dance are part of the common situations and realistic actions of the characters' everyday lives. In *My Fair Lady* (1964), the grueling transformation of a street girl into a glamorous aristocrat is described by song, and with numbers like "The Rain in Spain," songs actually assist that transformation. *Pennies from Heaven* (1981) and *Dancer in the Dark* (2000) are more ironic versions of this subgenre. In both films, musical interludes allow the characters (a sheet-music salesman during the Depression and a blind woman accused of murder, respectively) to transcend the tragedies and traumas of life. Similarly, *Les Misérables* (2012) **[Figure 10.38]** weaves its operatic songs of love and rebellion into its famous tale of Jean Valjean in nineteenth-century France.

10.38 ***Les Misérables*** (2012). The long-running Broadway hit was finally translated into a movie musical that integrated song and dramatic action in 2012.

Animated Musicals

VIEWING CUE

Watch a clip of a musical number from the musical *La La Land* (2016). Does this appear to be an integrated musical, a theatrical/backstage musical, or something else entirely? What cues hint at its musical subgenre?

Description
The scene shows several young men and women singing and dancing on the roofs of cars. A play button is present at the center of the screenshot.

Beginning with *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937), **animated musicals** use cartoon figures and stories to present songs and

music. Moving in the opposite direction of integrated musicals, these films transport the everyday into fantasy worlds, fully embracing the fantastic and utopian possibilities of music to make animals human, nature magical, or human life, as Mary Poppins says, "practically perfect in every way." Films like Tim Burton's *The Nightmare Before Christmas* (1993) and Sylvain Chomet's *The Triplets of Belleville* (2003) take audiences' imaginations in offbeat directions. Walt Disney recaptured the great popular and artistic success of its animated musicals *Pinocchio* (1940) and *Fantasia* (1940) with a string of hits starting with *The Little Mermaid* (1989) **[Figure 10.39]** and has continued to generate cultural touchstones in the era of computer animation with films like *Frozen* (2013) and *Frozen II* (2019).

10.39 ***The Little Mermaid*** (1989). The resurgence of the animated musical highlights the genre's utopian impulse, through which songs link the characters to fantasies and fantasy worlds.

Horror Films

Horror has been a popular literary and artistic theme at least since Sophocles's account of Oedipus's terrifying realization of his fate, the horrifying suicide of his mother, and his ghastly self-blinding. The supernatural mysteries of Gothic novels such as *The Monk* (1796) were followed in the nineteenth century by tales of monsters and murder, such as *Frankenstein* (1818) and *Dracula* (1897). Occasionally overlapping with science fiction, **horror films** have crossed cultures and appeared in various forms throughout film history. The fundamental elements of horror films include

- characters with physical, psychological, or spiritual deformities
- narratives built on suspense, surprise, and shock
- visual compositions that move between the dread of not seeing and the horror of seeing

In Carl Boese and Paul Wegener's *The Golem* (1920) **[Figure 10.40]** and Ridley Scott's *Alien* (1979), monstrous characters terrify the humans around them with their grotesque shapes and actions, lurking on the fringes of the visible world. Each film is infused with a nervous tension at the mere prospect of seeing a horror that exists just out of sight, a suspense that explodes when the creatures suddenly appear.

10.40 ***The Golem*** (1920). Horror takes monstrous physical form in this German expressionist film.

Horror films are about fear — physical fear, psychological fear, and sexual and political anxiety. The social repercussions of dramatizing what we fear can be debated, but the genre's widespread popularity suggests that it is a central cultural ritual. Like scary stories around a campfire, horror films dramatize our personal and social terrors in their different forms, in effect allowing us to admit them and attempt to deal with them in an imaginary way and as part of a communal experience. Horror films make terror visible and, potentially, manageable. An eerie tale about alien invaders taking

over human bodies in an American town, *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956) acts out the prevalent fears in the 1950s about military and ideological invasions. The frightening story of a high school misfit with telekinetic powers, the 1976 *Carrie* and its 2013 remake unveil all the anxiety and anger of female adolescence, and *28 Days Later* (2002) unleashes hordes of zombies, the product of a scientific experiment on a dangerous virus **[Figure 10.41]**. Anxieties around the history of race and racism have long informed horror films, from *White Zombie* (1932) and *Night of the Living Dead* (1968) to *Get Out* (2017), Jordan Peele's tale of a white suburban town that ensures African American acquiescence to the status quo in a diabolical manner.

10.41 ***28 Days Later*** (2002). The social and physical world crumbles in a horror film about a zombie-creating virus.

Within this genre, horror and fear have taken many shapes in different cultures over the past century, addressing audiences in specific historical terms. Here we call attention to three subgenres characterized by dominant elements — supernatural, psychological, and physical horror films.

Supernatural Horror Films

In **supernatural horror films**, a spiritual evil erupts in the human realm, perhaps to avenge a wrong or perhaps for no known reason. This subgenre includes movies such as the aforementioned *The Golem* (1920); the Japanese film *Kwaidan* (1964), which features four tales based on the writings of Lafcadio Hearn about samurai, monks, and spirits; and *The Sixth Sense* (1999), about a boy able to see the dead. In *The Exorcist* (1973), Satan possesses a young girl's body, deforming it into a twisted, obscenity-spewing nightmare **[Figure 10.42]**. *The Exorcist* is typical of supernatural horror in that how and why this evil has invaded the life of a modern and affluent family are never made entirely clear. Japanese horror films made in the aftermath of nuclear destruction featured ostensibly supernatural figures like Godzilla, while the more recent Korean horror film *The Host* (2006) taps into political relations with the United States as well as into environmental issues. Alongside more mainstream supernatural horror hits like the *Conjuring* series (2013–2020), smaller movies like *It Follows* (2015) use supernatural horror to evoke a variety of contemporary anxieties **[Figure 10.43]**.

10.42 ***The Exorcist*** (1973). Satan possesses a young girl in this 1970s masterpiece of supernatural horror.

10.43 ***It Follows*** (2015). This acclaimed horror film uses a mysterious supernatural force to represent teenage anxieties about sex, aging, and death.

Psychological Horror Films

Another variation on the threat to modern life, **psychological horror films** locate the dangers that threaten normal life in the minds of bizarre and deranged individuals. German expressionist films like *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1920) dealt with psychological themes, and many modern films — including *Psycho* (1960), *Whatever Happened to Baby Jane?* (1962), *Don't Look Now* (1973), *The Stepfather* (1987), *The Hand That Rocks the Cradle* (1992), and *Funny Games* (2007) — participate in this subgenre. *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991) is characteristic: although it features scenes of nauseating physical violence, Hannibal Lecter's diabolically brilliant mind and his empathetic bond with the protagonist, Clarice Starling, make this film horrifying on a mental rather than a physical level.

Physical Horror Films

Films in which the psychology of the characters takes second place to the depiction of graphic violence are examples of **physical horror films**, a subgenre with a long pedigree and a consistent place in every cycle of horror film. Tod Browning's *Freaks* (1932) testifies to both the longevity and the more intelligent potential of physical horror. Cut and banned in many countries, *Freaks* tells a morality tale of rejection and revenge. It features performers from actual carnival sideshows who, despite their shocking appearance and the repulsive revenge they perpetrate, ultimately act in more generous and humane ways than the physically "normal" villains.

Psycho (1960) is an originator of the contemporary horror films known as **slasher films**, which depict serial killers. Other grisly films that belong in this subgenre include *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* (1974) **[Figure 10.44]**, the story of a cannibalistic Texas family that attacks lost travelers; and *Halloween* (1978), the first of a sequence of films about ghastly serial killings that spawned many sequels and imitators, including *Saw* (2004), which creates a gruesome mise-en-scène fashioned by a twisted mind to test and torture two captives competing to survive.

10.44 ***The Texas Chain Saw Massacre*** (1974). This classic slasher film goes to extremes — cannibalism.

FILM IN FOCUS Genre and Gender in *Jennifer's Body* (2009)

See also: *The Babadook* (2014), *Get Out* (2017), *Sorry to Bother You* (2018)

To watch a clip from *Jennifer's Body* (2009), go to LaunchPad for *The Film Experience* at **launchpadworks.com**

In *Jennifer's Body*, screenwriter Diablo Cody and director Karyn Kusama set out to explore young women's fraught experiences of agency, friendship, and sexuality through a genre mash-up. "Hell is a teenage girl," begins the film's voiceover narration, immediately establishing the movie's ironic tone and verbal wit. Generic elements of both horror and comedy have been used effectively to heighten teen films' portrayals of shared adolescent experiences of insecurity and transformation, from *Scream* (1996) to *American Pie* (1999) and their collective sequels. *Jennifer's Body* is a campy horror film with elements of the teen comedy, featuring boys who are Satanic and girls who blur the lines between virgins and vamps. The tension arising from exaggerated blood and gore, fear and betrayal, is offset by snappy dialogue and absurd situations. Between the clashing codes and heightened gestures, the emotional truths of female relationships shine through.

Bookish Needy (Amanda Seyfried) and beautiful Jennifer (Megan Fox) have been best friends since their sandbox days **[Figure 10.45]**. But after Jennifer is transformed into a man-eating succubus, her behavior drives them apart. Through their relationship, the film comments on socially reinforced competition among women, from "mean girl" behavior to eating disorders. In a climactic showdown at an abandoned swimming pool, Needy attempts to save her boyfriend from Jennifer **[Figures 10.46a and 10.46b]**. The betrayal of their friendship lends poignance to the scene's improbability and gross-out humor.

10.45 ***Jennifer's Body*** (2009). Popular Jennifer and average Needy are best friends.

(a)

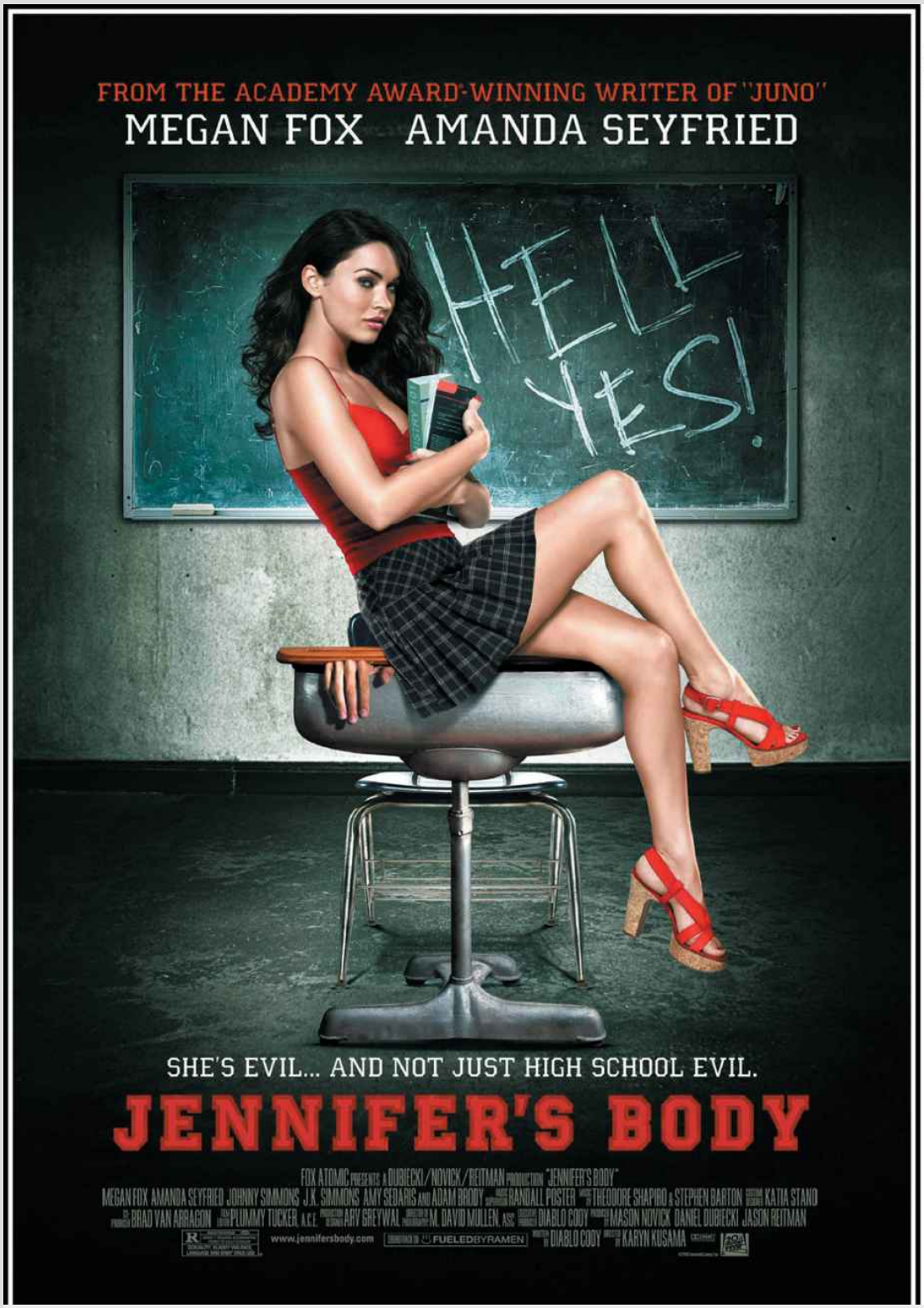
(b)

10.46a and 10.46b ***Jennifer's Body*** (2009). When a Satanic ritual drives Jennifer to attack Needy's boyfriend, the emotional intensity of the absurd scene lies in the betrayal of their friendship.

Description

The first still labeled (a) shows Megan Fox straddling a young man with her fanged mouth wide open and bloody towards the viewer. A large amount of blood pours from the young man's neck. The second still labeled (b) shows Amanda Seyfried soaked, wearing torn clothes, and streaked with mud.

Jennifer's Body received negative reviews and online hostility on its initial release, in part because of its genre hybridity. Audiences' discomfort with the film might have had as much to do with gender expectations as with genre expectations. Women are conventionally portrayed as victims in horror films, and their roles are often linked to their sexuality: female characters who are portrayed as sexually promiscuous are typically killed, whereas the "final girl" who survives to the end of the movie is usually presented as morally and sexually pure. *Jennifer's Body* deliberately reworks these genre conventions to engage female viewers, starting from the premise that young women are as preoccupied by myths and anxieties about bodies and sexuality — and potentially as attracted by genre films that address these issues — as boys are. In her earlier films, Karyn Kusama explored female roles in other genres traditionally associated with men. Her independent feature debut, *Girlfight* (2000), centers on a young female boxer, and her next project was a live-action adaptation of the animated science fiction series *Æon Flux* (2005). But 20th Century Fox's marketing campaign for *Jennifer's Body* targeted male viewers by prominently featuring Megan Fox, a star associated with her role as "eye candy" in the *Transformers* franchise (2007–2018) **[Figure 10.47]**. The film's title didn't help; mainstream audiences did not get the reference to a song of the same name by the riot girl band *Hole*. *Jennifer's Body* — on the levels of production, content, and reception — shows how closely gender and genre are intertwined.



TCD/Alamy.

10.47 ***Jennifer's Body*** (2009). The film's ad campaign targeted male viewers, drawing on conventional expectations of gender and genre.

Description
Text at the top reads,"From the academy award-winning writer of"Juno." Megan Fox and Amanda Seyfried." Text at the bottom reads,"She's evil… and not just high school evil." Details about the movie follow in small text below.

Other viewers objected to the filmmakers' claim that the film is a feminist subversion of the horror genre, given that Needy is forced to destroy her best friend and that much of Diablo Cody's witty dialogue heightens their conflict. Moreover, Jennifer's so-called power comes at the cost of her stylization as the object of the viewer's gaze and from her enactment of the misogynist myth of the vagina dentata, the toothed vagina that threatens masculine wholeness. Such critiques foreground genre's role as an expression of unresolved social issues. Individual genre films, no matter how self-conscious about their subversive intent, cannot fully stabilize real conflicts around changing gender roles.

Horror films stage encounters with ideas that a society attempts to regulate or repress, such as difference, death, and sexuality. Comedies let the repressed into the open. Both can be cathartic and critically useful. For example, female reproductive capacity erupts as a threat to the status quo in such horror classics as *Carrie* (1976) and the *Alien* franchise (1979–2017). *Jennifer's Body* sets out to reclaim the power that this fear of female sexuality implicitly grants femininity. For example, Jennifer's attractiveness makes it comically easy for her to find victims. The film exaggerates both the threat of women's difference from men and the ways in which women's bodies are controlled by patriarchal social norms. Jennifer's transformation into a demon occurs after she is assaulted by the members of a rock band who hope to gain power by ritual virgin sacrifice; the ritual goes awry because Jennifer is not "pure." Her resulting monstrousness can be seen either as further punishment for breaking the rules of female behavior or as an empowering revenge fantasy: she literally eats boys for breakfast.

Where the horror genre typically heightens sexual anxiety, the teen comedy exaggerates it as farce. *Jennifer's Body* combines tropes of both genres to take

these issues seriously. Diablo Cody previously used humor to defray the difficulty of facing an unplanned pregnancy in her first film as screenwriter, *Juno* (2007). *Jennifer's Body* is also about a young woman's struggle for control over her own body, treating weighty matters with a light touch. When Jennifer is vanquished at the end of the film, Needy becomes the unruly one. The film opens with Needy in solitary confinement in a mental institution and ends with her avenging the fate of her childhood friend. Both hero and monster are women, and they reflect on each other. The film's complex exploration of relationships among women extends to its makers' collaboration and its viewers' interpretation. Ten years after its initial release, the film has found the audience it was looking for.

Crime Films

Like other genres, **crime films** represent a large category that describes a wide variety of films. These films typically feature criminals and individuals dedicated to crime detection and plots that involve criminal acts. Crime novels and short stories — from the mysteries of Edgar Allan Poe and the tales of Sherlock Holmes to the pulp fiction of the 1920s, such as Dashiell Hammett's *Red Harvest* (1929), and Walter Mosley's ongoing *Easy Rawlins* series — have been a staple of modern culture. When early movies searched for good plots, criminal dramas that contained physical action and relied on keen observation were recognized as a genre made for the cinema, where movement and vision are central. A crime film's chief characteristics include

- characters who live on the edge of a mysterious or violent society, either criminals or individuals dedicated to crime detection
- plots of crime, increasing mystery, and often ambiguous resolution
- urban, often dark and shadowy, settings

From *Underworld* (1927) to *The French Connection* (1971), the principal characters of crime movies are usually either criminals or individuals pursuing criminals. In *Underworld*, gangster Bull Weed flees and then faces his relentless police pursuers in the mean streets of Chicago. In *The French Connection*, detective Popeye Doyle becomes entangled in New York's narcotics underworld. In the first film, the law triumphs, but the tantalizing attraction of underworld life remains. In the second, legal victory is only partial, and the glamour of the international drug market far outshines the tattered life of a New York cop **[Figure 10.48]**.

10.48 ***The French Connection*** (1971). Within the complex web of an international drug cartel, a determined New York detective relentlessly pursues its multiple and mysterious agents.

If the outsider characters in horror films represent what we as a society most physically and psychologically fear and repress, then the outsider characters in crime films describe what we as upholders of the status quo socially reject. Perhaps the foundation for this fascination with illegal behaviors is that most people are capable of both social and antisocial inclinations at one time or another. Two of the most gripping and socially complex crime movies in film history, *The Godfather* (1972) and *The Godfather: Part II* (1974), offer a picture of twentieth-century America that culminates in the transformation of Michael Corleone from a respectable son and war hero into a ruthless mob boss willing and able to destroy any enemies or competitors. The films reveal both sides of the Mafia cult — its familial dedication and loyalty and its vicious thirst for

power at any cost. Echoing this duality, these films suggest that U.S. society has grown from a struggling immigrant community into a rich and intimidating nation. Often criminal activity is shown as an understandable option for characters who aren't given a fair chance to succeed through legitimate channels because of race, class, or gender. We may feel exhilaration when the band of strip club workers in *Hustlers* (2019) take advantage of Wall Street traders who have not only objectified them but also taken advantage of ordinary investors **[Figure 10.49]**.

10.49 *Hustlers* (2019). Strong bonds of friendship and tough life stories encourage our identification with women who shake down strip club patrons to make a living.

The different incarnations of crime films, from the 1920s to the present, include three prominent and popular subgenres — the gangster film, the detective film, and the stylistically distinctive film noir.

Gangster Films

Gangster films are set in the world of organized crime and its violent criminals. *Scarface* (1932) depicts a vicious mob war in which rivals coolly manipulate and shoot each other **[Figure 10.50a]**, and *The Public Enemy* (1931) follows Tom Powers's rise from a juvenile delinquent to a bootlegging killer who terrorizes Chicago. Both films were made and set in the 1930s, when crime thrived in defiance of Prohibition. More recent versions of gangster films — the remake *Scarface* (1983) **[Figure 10.50b]**, *Goodfellas* (1990), *Road to Perdition* (2002), and *The Departed* (2006), for example — tend to escalate the violence and explore the peculiar personalities of the criminals or the strained rituals that define them as a subculture. Several of these films are directed by Martin Scorsese, who continues in *The Irishman* (2019) to explore how these codes and rituals are reflected in his filmmaking choices.

(b) Photofest, Inc.

(a)

(b)

10.50a and 10.50b *Scarface* (1932 and 1983). A classic gangster film from the genre's heyday in the 1930s was later remade with Al Pacino.

Description

The first still labeled (a) from the original movie shows two men discussing something at a desk. The second still labeled (b) from the remake shows Al Pacino relaxing in a bubble bath and smoking a cigar.

The gangster formula finds distinct features across cultural contexts. The urban milieu of hip-hop and so-called gangsta rap characterizes a cycle of African American crime films of the early 1990s, including *Boyz N the Hood* (1991), *New Jack City* (1991), and *Juice* (1992), in which the codes of loyalty and family are strained by the lure of fame, drugs, and cash. Japanese actor-director Takeshi Kitano has received wide acclaim for his reworking of the traditional Japanese gangster, or *yakuza*, film in *Hana-bi* (1997) and other films, while two Hong Kong films — Johnnie To's *Exiled* (2006) **[Figure 10.51]** and Andrew Lau and Alan Mak's *Infernal Affairs* (2002; remade in 2006 as Scorsese's *The Departed*) — demonstrate both the global reach of this genre and how it has returned from abroad to reshape Hollywood films.

10.51 ***Exiled*** (2006). Hong Kong gangster films such as this one have influenced recent Hollywood genre films.

Detective Films

On the other side of this generic crime coin, **detective films** focus on a protagonist who represents the law or someone related to it — perhaps ambiguously — such as a private investigator. Usually these individuals must battle a criminal element (and sometimes the police) to solve a mystery or resolve a crime. Hard-boiled detectives were introduced in crime fiction, and television police procedural expands the genre across media. In one of the most renowned films of this type, *The Maltese Falcon* (1941), detective Sam Spade pursues both a mysterious treasure (the falcon statue) and the murderers of his partner (killed for the statue). Suspected by the police, Spade embarks on a personal quest not so much for the treasure but, through his loyalty to his partner, for truth and integrity. Reinterpreted and reinvented in different cultures and with protagonists other than white males, this subgenre remains visible in unusual movies such as Jean-Luc Godard's meditation on crime detection, *Détective* (1985), and Lizzie Borden's feminist story of a sex crimes investigation in Georgia, *Love Crimes* (1992).

Film Noir

Although regularly discussed as a film style of shades and shadows, *film noir* can be considered a subgenre of crime films that emerged in the 1940s and that distinctly elevates the legal, moral, and atmospheric ambiguity and confusion found in early examples of the genre. No longer simply about law versus crime or the ethical toughness of a detective, these films, such as the 1944 *Double Indemnity*, uncover darkness and corruption in virtually all their characters that never seem fully resolved. Film noir suggests a visual style that emphasizes darkness and shadows that, in turn, reflect the shady moral universes common in these films. Protagonists waver between the law and lawlessness, and relationships commonly appear determined by violence and sexuality, characterized notably in the femmes fatales who tempt and often betray the male protagonist. Orson Welles's *Touch of Evil* (1958) is one of the most powerful examples of film noir. Arriving in a Mexico-U.S. border zone wild with drugs, prostitution, and murders, Mexican lawman Mike Vargas searches the dark alleys and nightclubs to solve a murder and expose a cover-up. He discovers that at the heart of the corruption is the American assigned to the case, Hank Quinlan, "a good detective but a lousy cop" **[Figure 10.52]**. Although the original film noir cycle came to an end around the time *Touch of Evil* was made, such neo-noir films as *Body Heat* (1981) and *Sin City* (2005) represent a self-conscious awareness of the generic conventions of film noir and often create characters and crimes far more confused and corrupt than their historical prototypes.

10.52 ***Touch of Evil*** (1958). Orson Welles plays Hank Quinlan, rotten with corruption in this classic example of film noir.

Thinking about Film Genre

Specific film genres vary and evolve in different ways, and viewers make sense of those genres according to their developing and expanding experience of genre. As viewers see and think about how genre films are enjoyed and understood, certain conceptual frameworks shape the experience. Two broad frameworks for understanding film genres are a prescriptive approach and a descriptive approach. Within these frameworks, viewers can see genres as part of a classical tradition (which might emphasize the historical origin or structural ideal of a genre) or as part of a revisionist tradition (which might understand genres as adapting to different cultures and different historical periods). Finally, genres can be considered in spatial terms as local and global.

Prescriptive and Descriptive Approaches

Viewers and filmmakers alike classify a movie according to their experience and understanding of a genre. A viewer who has seen and considers *Touch of Evil* (1958) the gold standard of film noir may have less patience accepting *Drive* (2011) in the same category, whereas a different viewer may have a more flexible view of the genre. The first viewer would hold a prescriptive approach that

assumes a preexisting model for any particular film in the same category. In the case of *Drive*, a viewer with a prescriptive approach might ask "Is this protagonist the classically conflicted hero?," "Is Hollywood a seedy underworld?," and "Is there an adequately dark, traumatic crime in this film?" This viewer believes that a successful genre film deviates as little as possible from the prescribed model and that a viewer can and should be objective in determining a genre.

A second viewer might respond with a descriptive approach, one that assumes a genre changes over time by building on older films and developing in new ways. This viewer prizes genres for different reasons and accepts that subjectivity can help determine a genre classification. In the case of a film like *Black Swan* (2010), such a viewer might find elements of film noir as important as the characteristics of melodrama. The heroine Nina (played by Natalie Portman) walks a precarious line between sanity and madness and between darkness and light in the competitive world of professional ballet. Nina's uncertain hold on reality lends to the ambiguous atmosphere, and the fact that she may or may not have been seduced by her rival, Lily (played by Mila Kunis), serves as a contemporary twist on the film noir themes of sexuality, masculinity, and the femme fatale.

A filmgoer looking at genre descriptively might survey the history of melodrama and deduce how its chief characteristics have altered

through time. Admitting that such an exercise will necessarily depend on a person's particular perspective, knowledge, and access, this viewer will value specific films for how they develop, change, and innovate within a generic pattern.

From this perspective, a film like Rainer Werner Fassbinder's *Ali: Fear Eats the Soul* (1974), about the social prejudices that hound the relationship between a young Arab migrant worker and an older German woman, is a remarkable variation on the melodramatic formula, which in the different cultural context of the 1950s produced Douglas Sirk's *All That Heaven Allows* (1955). In this earlier version of *Ali*'s story, a wealthy socialite falls in love with her younger gardener. With Fassbinder's "remake" in mind, Todd Haynes's *Far from Heaven* (2002) reshapes and develops that same basic story and generic formula into a contemporary film in which the melodramatic crisis turns on a married man's discovery of his gay identity and his wife's interracial intimacy with their gardener **[Figures 10.53a–10.53c]**.

(a)

(b)

(c)

10.53a–10.53c ***Approaches to melodrama:*** **(a)** ***All That Heaven Allows*** (1955)**, (b)** ***Ali: Fear Eats the Soul*** (1974)**, (c)** ***Far from Heaven*** (2002). Melodrama's generic characteristics are both foregrounded and modified in loose remakes of Douglas Sirk's original by filmmakers Rainer Werner Fassbinder and Todd Haynes.

Description
Still (a) shows a man holding a ladder as he speaks to a woman standing on the walkway in front of a home. Still (b) shows a man and woman dancing in an otherwise empty restaurant. Still (c) shows a man and woman conversing in a forested area.

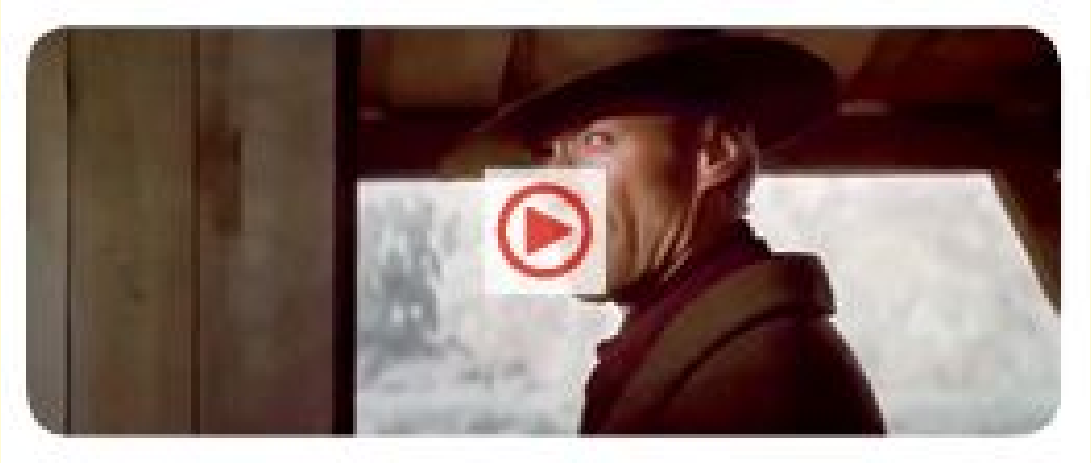
Both prescriptive and descriptive approaches can point viewers to particular readings of films. A studio or journalist may, for instance, reference a particular genre as the framework for how a specific movie should be seen and evaluated. A studio may promote *Nebraska* (2013), a film about an aging father's stressful relationship with his family, as an offbeat melodrama, whereas a journalist may urge audiences to see it as a road movie. Following one or the other of those prescribed genres will most likely result in different understandings of the film.

Conversely, a movie historian may examine a number of similar films in order to describe the basic formulas of a genre (say, science fiction), but if the films that generate her description are limited to Hollywood movies since 1950, the model will emphasize and overlook generic features that a wider survey, one including silent or Asian films, for example, might not. In both instances, the resulting

model of a film genre reflects the prescriptive or descriptive approach used and generates meanings that limit, expand, or focus a viewer's understanding accordingly.

Classical and Revisionist Traditions

Watch a sequence from *Unforgiven* (1992) online, and identify those features that align it with a classical western and those features that suggest a revisionist perspective.



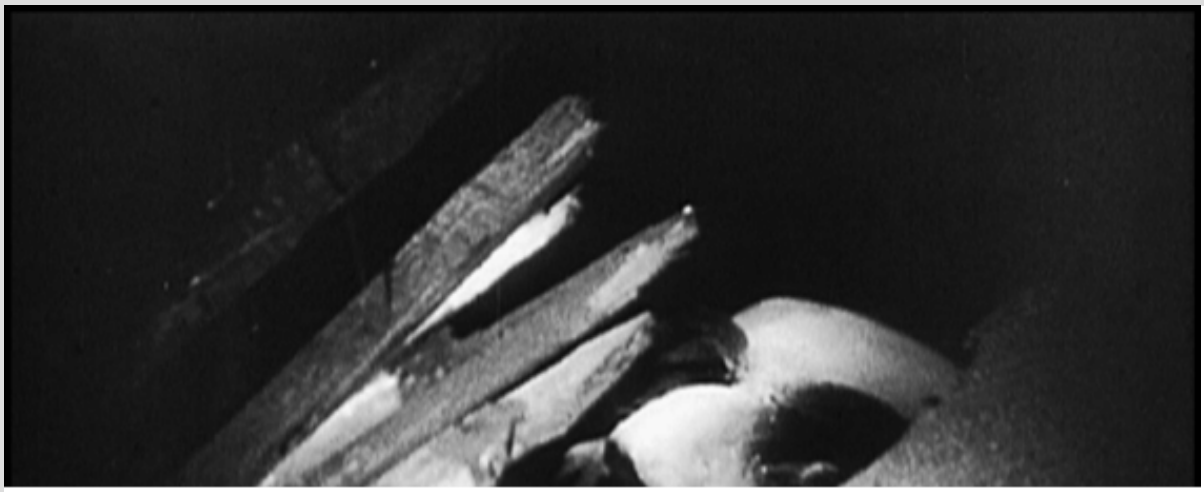
The significance of a particular film's engagement with genre conventions also is shaped by its situation within classical or revisionist traditions. Classical genre traditions are aligned with prescriptive approaches that place a film in relation to a paradigm that a genre film either successfully follows or does not. Classical

traditions establish relatively fixed sets of formulas and conventions, associated with certain films or with a specific place in history.

Stemming from descriptive approaches, revisionist genre traditions see a film as a function of changing historical and cultural contexts that modify the conventions and formulas of its genre. A particular western, for example, will be understood differently from a classical perspective than from a revisionist one. Together these two traditions identify one of the central paradoxes of any genre — that genres can appear to be at once timeless and time bound and can both create patterns that transcend history and be extremely sensitive measures of history.

Historical Paradigms

Classical traditions can be viewed as both historical and structural paradigms. A historical paradigm presumes that a genre evolved to a point of perfection at some point in history and that one or more films at that point describe the generic ideal. For film critic André Bazin, John Ford's *Stagecoach* is the historical paradigm for the western that reached its pinnacle in the United States in 1939. For others, F. W. Murnau's *Nosferatu* (1922) is the historical paradigm for the horror film, achieving its essential qualities in the climate of 1920s Germany **[Figure 10.54]**.



10.54 ***Nosferatu*** (1922). This film is a historical paradigm for horror films.

Structural Paradigms

A structural paradigm relies less on historical precedent than on a formal or structural ideal that may or may not be actually seen, in a complete or pure form, in any specific film. For example, regardless of the many variations on science fiction films, a viewer familiar with the genre may develop a structural paradigm for the classic science fiction film. After viewing a wide spectrum of films — from *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (1951) to *The Man Who Fell to Earth* (1976)

and *Pacific Rim* (2013) — a viewer may understand that the paradigm for the genre requires a visual and dramatic conflict between earth and outer space, the centrality of special effects, and a deadline plot structure. Some films fit this paradigm easily, whereas others — such as the frolicking *Repo Man* (1984), about teenage angst, the repossessing of cars, and a mad scientist — may seem less convincing participants in the genre.

HISTORY CLOSE UP

John Waters and Midnight Movies

A still from a midnight movie shows a person in a short dress walking on a sidewalk. Graffiti on the building beside her reads, "Free Tex Watso."

The term *midnight movies* describes a somewhat peculiar version of a film genre. Less a product of certain generic conventions and formulas, it refers to movies that

historically were featured in the late-night screenings of small art or local cinemas. Often low-budget films, like *Plan 9 from Outer Space* (1959), or cult classics from lost eras, like Tod Browning's *Freaks* (1932), they share offbeat styles and stories, sometimes with uncensored sex or exaggerated violence, and they implicitly celebrate their position outside mainstream cinema. Their lack of Hollywood polish helps them appeal to audiences that often have been ignored or marginalized in the past.

The films of John Waters have become especially popular versions of this practice. His frequent star, the physically extravagant Divine, appears in *Pink Flamingos* (1972, right) and *Female Trouble* (1974), forming, with *Desperate Living* (1977), what Waters has referred to as his Trash Trilogy. In these and other films, Waters gleefully embraces campy humor, excessive characters, subversive sexuality, and often grotesque actions. Later Waters films like *Hairspray* (1988) and *Cecil B. Demented* (2000), no longer associated with late-night screenings, moved him closer to the mainstream of cinema culture. But they represent a genre that thrives on challenging and overturning traditional expectations.

Generic Revisionism

In contrast, generic revisionism assumes that a genre is subject to historical and cultural flux, continually changing as part of a dialogue with films of the same genre. Films within a genre adapt their conventions and formulas to reflect different times and places. From this perspective, Fred Schepisi's *Barbarosa* (1982) is as much a western as *Stagecoach* (1939), but it is adapted to a contemporary climate that sees outlaws and their myths in a more fantastic light.

More modern films may demonstrate **generic reflexivity** — unusual self-consciousness about generic identity. These films clearly and visibly comment on the generic paradigms. *Young Frankenstein* (1974) and *L.A. Confidential* (1997) fit this model — the first a goofy look at one of the most famous models for a horror film and the second a serious, self-conscious reworking of the crime film. Less obviously, perhaps, Werner Herzog's *Nosferatu the Vampyre* (1979) does not simply re-create the original *Nosferatu* (1922) but also returns to many of its conventions and icons as a way of commenting on the continuing relevance of the vampire myth and the ways that it still reveals much about contemporary society **[Figure 10.55]**.

A still from the movie, Nosferatu the Vampyre, shows a pale, hairless man biting a the neck of a pale woman lying in bed.

10.55 ***Nosferatu the Vampyre*** (1979). As an example of generic reflexivity, Werner Herzog's film re-creates and manipulates the conventions and formulas of a horror film classic, specifically referencing images and themes from F. W. Murnau's 1922 *Nosferatu*.

Local and Global Genres

Generic patterns frequently emerge in specific times, places, events, and cultures — these are what we might call "local" genres. Modern American teen films — such as *The Breakfast Club* (1985), *Heathers* (1988), *Clueless* (1995), *Bring It On* (2000), and *Easy A* (2010) — can be considered examples of a genre that relates in very particular ways to the characters, crises, and rituals of contemporary American youth **[Figure 10.56]**.

A still from the movie, Easy A, shows a seductively dressed young woman walking through a crowd of gaping teens.

10.56 ***Easy A*** (2010). This film about a teenage girl using rumors about her promiscuity to elevate her social standing is part of the cycle of teen films prevalent since the 1980s.

In a sense, all genres are local because they first take shape to reflect the interests and traditions of a particular community or nation. Westerns are essentially an American genre, although they have traveled successfully around the world to Australia, Italy, Spain, and many other countries. Although horror is now a global genre, horror films have their roots in the expressionist cinema of Germany around 1920.

Of the many local genres that have appeared around the world, two examples that clearly stress the connection between genre and a particular culture are the Japanese *jidai-geki* films and the Austrian and German Heimat films. Popular since the 1920s, the Japanese ***jidai-geki* films** are period films or costume dramas set before 1868, when feudal Japan entered the modern Meiji period. Movies such as *Revere the Emperor* (1927) and *A Diary of Chuji's Travels* (1927) work as historical travelogues to resurrect the customs and glory of times long past. As is the case with most nations' relationship to their preindustrial past, many Japanese people view this period with curiosity, nostalgia, and pride, often seeing in these early films a kind of cultural purity that was lost in the twentieth century. Through the years, however, this genre, like all successful genres, has assimilated current affairs into its conventions and formulas. Besides feudal courts and sword battles, *jidai-geki* films develop plots about class unrest and social rebellion. Akira Kurosawa's *Ran* (1985) is an interesting engagement with this essentially Japanese genre. This feudal costume drama is replete with many of the *jidai-geki*

conventions. It is adapted from Shakespeare's *King Lear* and, ultimately, describes the end of an ancient world **[Figure 10.57]**.

A still from the movie, Ran, shows an older man standing among six other men sitting, clad in bright traditional outfits, in a meadow.

10.57 ***Ran*** (1985). The Shakespearean story of King Lear is retold in this essentially Japanese genre film.

Set in idyllic countryside locales, Austrian and German **Heimat films** depict a world of traditional folk values in which love and family triumph over virtually any social evil, communities gather around maypoles, and townspeople sing traditional German folk songs celebrating the "home" country. Enjoyed by Austrian and German audiences throughout the first half of the twentieth century, this genre thrived in those countries with films such as *The Priest from Kirchfeld* (1914), *Heimat* (1938), and *The Trapp Family* (1956). As German filmmakers became more self-conscious about the Nazi era and the connection between this political history and the movies, modern films resurrected the Heimat genre, now reinterpreted as complicit in the social history of Germany. Peter Fleischmann's *Hunting Scenes from Bavaria* (1969), Volker Schlöndorff's *The Sudden Wealth of the Poor People of Kombach* (1971), Edgar Reitz's sixteen-hour *Heimat* (1984) **[Figure 10.58]**, and Stefan Ruzowitzky's *The Inheritors* (1998) are all explicit attacks on the mythology of this genre or reexaminations of its social meaning and power.

A still from the movie, Heimat, shows a large family packing and entering cars.

10.58 ***Heimat*** (1984). The traditional values of German home life are subjected to the conditions of postwar occupation.

Recognizing film genres is a key part of the film experience, and understanding and evaluating those genres as part of larger historical, cultural, and conceptual frameworks enriches and broadens both our pleasure in and knowledge of what a specific film achieves. Identifying the prescriptive or descriptive model that informs your point of view and placing a film in a classical or revisionist generic tradition gives that film additional layers and resonances.

Chapter 10 Review

SUMMARY

- A **genre** is a set of conventions and formulas that organize and categorize films according to repeated subjects, icons, and styles.
- Genres have an extensive history in film and before film.
  - Before film, genres were used to classify works of literature, theater, painting, music, and other arts.
  - Starting in the 1920s, genre became an important way in which the Hollywood studio system efficiently produced, distributed, and marketed films.
  - Since the studio system's decline, genres have continued to play a major role in shaping audience expectations, including in today's massive film franchises.
- *Generic conventions* identify a genre through such features as character types, settings, props, or events that are repeated from film to film.
  - Recurring images or image patterns in a genre are called **iconography**.
  - *Generic formulas* determine how generic conventions are organized in a plot.

    - **Hybrid genres**, such as romantic comedies, are created through the fusion of different genres.
    - **Subgenres** are specific forms of a genre denoted by an adjective, such as the *epic western* or *slapstick comedy*.
- Six major film genres are **comedies, westerns, melodramas, musicals, horror films**, and **crime films**.
- Two broad frameworks for thinking about film genre are *descriptive* and *prescriptive*.

    - A *prescriptive approach* assumes that a successful genre film deviates as little as possible from a prescribed model.

        - Related to prescriptive approaches, *classical generic traditions* establish relatively fixed sets of genre formulas and conventions.
    - A *descriptive approach* assumes that genres change over time and that a successful genre film builds on older films and develops in new ways.

        - Related to descriptive approaches, *revisionist generic traditions* see films as functions of changing historical and cultural contexts that modify genre conventions.
        - Films may demonstrate **generic reflexivity**: unusual self-consciousness about genre identity.
    - Generic patterns can be connected to specific times, places, events, and cultures. These *local genres* include Japanese ***jidai-geki* films** and Austrian and German **Heimat films**.

KEY TERMS

genre
film noir
blaxploitation
iconography
archetype
hybrid genre
subgenre
comedy
slapstick comedy
screwball comedy
romantic comedy
western
epic western
existential western
revisionist western
melodrama
physical melodrama
family melodrama
social melodrama
musical
theatrical musical
integrated musical
animated musical
horror film
supernatural horror film
psychological horror film
physical horror film

slasher film
crime film
gangster film
detective film
generic reflexivity
jidai-geki film
Heimat film

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PART FOUR CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES
reading and writing about film

A still from the movie, Little Women, that shows four young women in dresses and straw hats standing side-by-side on a beach.

CHAPTER 11

Reading about Film: Critical Theories and Methods

- Early and classical film theory
- Postwar film criticism and culture
- Contemporary film theory
- New directions in film theory

CHAPTER 12
Writing a Film Essay: Observations, Arguments, Research, and Analysis

- Analytical film essays
- Preparing to write
- Elements of a film essay
- Researching the movies

Often our feelings and thoughts about a particular film linger well after we leave the theater or turn off our TV or computer. We may puzzle over a film's meanings or over how it has managed to move us so deeply. We may then seek out reviews, essays, or books about the film, its director, or the country where it was made. Our immediate response to the images and sounds in Greta Gerwig's *Little Women* (2019) might prompt thinking about the film's framing, color, and score or perhaps doing some research into Louisa May Alcott's 1868 novel and its five earlier movie adaptations. As we become more interested in film history, criticism, theory, and analysis through our reading, we can also be inspired to write about the film — in the case of *Little Women*, perhaps, as a reflection of a contemporary feminist perspective — or even to produce our own video essay about the movie.

In the final two chapters, we explore and explain how knowledge of film criticism and theory as well as the act of researching and writing about film deepen and enrich our experience of the movies. Chapter 11 introduces theoretical approaches to film and examines different critical methods that have evolved over the course of film history, while Chapter 12 maps the steps and procedures for turning our initial perceptions about a movie into a sophisticated essay that may be supported by stills or clips from the film. Through an understanding of theoretical speculation and critical analysis, our film experience grows and develops in as many directions as we are willing to take it.

CHAPTER 11 READING ABOUT FILM
Critical Theories and Methods

A still from the movie, Sherlock, Junior, where Buster Keaton examines a strip of film.

Buster Keaton's 1924 film *Sherlock, Jr.* opens with a warning never to do two things at once. Keaton plays a motion-picture projectionist who takes on the role of detective in order to prove his romantic rival is a thief. Soon he becomes literally split in two, as he falls asleep in the projection booth and his dreaming self enters the fictional film on screen. His surrogate solves the crime and gets the girl, but not before the film explores other, non-narrative characteristics of the cinematic illusion. As Keaton begins to sit on a bench, the film breaks verisimilitude, cutting with a graphic match to a street scene where the actor completes his action, only to fall down in traffic. Several additional cuts match his pratfalls with changing backgrounds — a mountaintop, a lion-infested jungle, a desert where he narrowly avoids being struck by a freight train. Such bodily vulnerability to the speed and machinery of the early twentieth century is explored in many of Keaton's films, while viewers remain safe in their seats. The film touches on many preoccupations of film theory, including asking what characteristics are specific to the medium, the place of realism, the syntax of storytelling, and the way the movie viewer is always doing two things at once — believing in an illusion and appreciating its craft.

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Audiovisual technologies are now more prevalent and more integrated with our lives than ever before. Each time a new technology is introduced — television, home video, the internet,

mobile platforms — predictions abound that moviegoing will be eclipsed by the new leisure forms. However, these pronouncements on the death of cinema have been premature. What is it about the film experience that resonates meaningfully with modern life? This question, which emerged with the first projected moving images, continues to drive our thinking about mediated experiences today. Such reflection on the nature and significance of the medium is the province of **film theory**. The many books, essays, and online writing produced by theorists in this field explore the specificity of the medium, the features of individual films or categories of films, and the interactions between viewers and films, among other topics. In this chapter, we introduce the theoretical study of film through selected terms, histories, and positions. The field is ever-expanding, so this introduction aims to orient readers toward questions rather than to provide an exhaustive account.

Because cinema is accessible and familiar, some viewers are skeptical about the need to theorize the medium. Yet the knowledge that comes with avid moviegoing can itself be the foundation of a theoretical position. Every time we go to the movies, we evaluate elements about the film beforehand. When we choose drama or comedy, we invoke genre; if we buy a ticket for the new Wes Anderson film, we draw on auteur theory; and if we elect, while acknowledging the dismissive quality of the term, a "chick flick," we invoke some understanding of reception theory, which focuses on how different kinds of audiences relate to different kinds of films.

When we speak of the fictional world of *The Irishman* (2019) **[Figure 11.1]** as if it were real, we invoke the concept of **verisimilitude** (having the quality of truth), and when we discuss the improbabilities of a comic book movie, we recognize the "willing suspension of disbelief" required of consumers of fictional stories, plays, and movies. Even when we select a seat at the movie theater, implicit in our choice is an ideal vantage point from which the film illusion will be most complete.

A still shows two men eating at a café, in a scene from the movie, The Irishman.

11.1 ***The Irishman*** (2019). When audiences evaluate the verisimilitude of the world of organized crime in Philadelphia, they are deploying a theoretical concept in an experiential way.

As these examples suggest, every theoretical approach to cinema foregrounds some elements and relegates others to the background. Besides looking at different aspects of the experience, film theories vary in their level of analysis and in the features that they address. Some theories regard the cinema as a mass phenomenon that needs to be approached on the institutional level (from the industry to the broad-based reception of films), and others are concerned only with formal principles. It may be helpful to think of each theory introduced in this chapter as part of the tool kit of the cultural critic. The tool kit metaphor implies that different theories are needed to address different questions and that theoretical inquiry helps us not only to take something apart but also to build models and connections. We encourage you to read these thinkers' own words so that you can share in their perspectives on the field's major debates.

KEY OBJECTIVES

- Explain the concept of cinematic specificity, and introduce the method of formal analysis.
- Describe the interdisciplinary nature of film and media studies.
- Outline the major positions in classical film theory, from Soviet montage theory to realism.
- Connect auteur theory and genre criticism to postwar film culture and its journals.
- Demonstrate knowledge about the key schools of thought within contemporary film theory, including semiotics and structuralism; psychoanalysis and apparatus theory; feminist and queer theory; cultural

studies, including race and representation; film philosophy; postmodernism and media convergence.

- Relate new forms of film commentary including blogs, podcasts, and video essays to the history of film theory.

The Evolution of Film Theory

Before we present an overview of the history and key debates of film theory, we address two issues that are at the heart of the discipline and yet seemingly at odds with each other. First, the medium of film has elements that make it a distinct aesthetic form or mode of communication that demands its own analytical approach. Second, because film combines elements of other art forms and represents various commercial, artistic, and social interests, it must also be considered from an interdisciplinary perspective by drawing on art history, literary theory, sociology, and other disciplines. The excitement of studying film theory lies in the challenge of illuminating these two seemingly contradictory dimensions. Sustained critical interrogations — such as the writings by filmmakers, philosophers, and academics examined here — help us see cinema both as a distinct aesthetic form and as a social institution that shares commonalities with other arts and cultural experiences.

Theories of an artistic medium often begin by trying to define their object — the nature of its being or **ontology**. How does cinema differ from painting or photography, for example? All use pictorial imagery, but film differs from painting because it is composed of photographic images captured with a camera. It differs from photography in that its images are displayed to give the illusion of

motion. As a storytelling medium, cinema borrows from the novel, yet the way it associates images with emotions resembles poetry. Like music, film is a time-based performance. Television borrows audiovisual and narrative language from film, yet its consumption is driven by different patterns of flow and interruption, contexts of space and time, and serial storytelling. Each of these comparisons can and has been extended. Theorists hope that from ever more precise statements of the properties of cinema, they can develop shared terms and inquiries.

VIEWING CUE

Compare a scene from a film you have viewed either in class or on your own with a passage from the book from which it was adapted. What elements are specific to the film?

Questions of cinema's **medium specificity** — its properties that are unique to the medium — and its interdisciplinary links are especially pertinent in light of today's film technologies. Computer-generated imagery (CGI) and new forms of distribution and display raise interesting ontological questions about cinema. No longer is the film image a trace of the physical contact between light and an object that is chemically registered on film stock. Instead, the properties of the digital image are digitally coded and thus mutable. A computer-generated image does not have a real-world referent; in a sense the image *is* the thing **[Figure 11.2]**. Past work in the fields of

film theory and history can help us make sense of the unique properties of digital media, and new approaches like cognitive science, data analysis, and game theory can contribute to the study of contemporary film and media.

A still shows a young boy and a panther standing on a rocky outcropping and tree branch respectively among cliffs, in a scene from the movie, The Jungle Book.

11.2 ***The Jungle Book*** (2016). Is the nature or ontology of the film challenged by the combination of computer-generated imagery (CGI) and photography?

While there are no clear chronological or intellectual boundaries to the field of film theory, we can contextualize important thinkers and understand how key principles and terms have been defined and debated over time. Film theory and the related theories that address new and emerging audiovisual media undoubtedly will take on different questions in the future, and concerns will be shaped by a long and complex intellectual history.

Early and Classical Film Theory

In this section, we begin with the earliest reflections on film that occurred not long after the first public exhibitions by Thomas Edison and the Lumière brothers. We then consider the body of work designated as **classical film theory** — writing on the fundamental questions of cinema produced in the first half of the twentieth century. This body of commentary emerged with the maturity of the medium in the 1920s and finds a convenient endpoint with the publication of Siegfried Kracauer's major work *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality* in 1960.

Early Film Theory

"Last night I was in the Kingdom of Shadows. If you only knew how strange it is to be there," wrote the Russian novelist Maxim Gorky after attending a film screening in 1896 **[Figure 11.3]**. When movies were new, observers searched for metaphors to describe the experience of seeing them. Struck by movies' magical properties, viewers attempted to pinpoint what was distinctive about the medium. Some early critics approached moviegoing as a social phenomenon, a new form of urban entertainment characteristic of the dawning twentieth century. Others viewed the cinema in aesthetic terms, heralding it as the "seventh art."

A poster titled, Cinematographe Lumiere, features a gathering of a few men and women at a movie screening. Men are well dressed in overcoats and hats while the women carry elegant hairstyles.

11.3 Advertisement for the Lumière Brothers' invention. Visitors to the first film showings were prompted to speculate about the new form.

Although today film theory is now considered part of an academic discipline, earlier writers on the topic came from many contexts and traditions outside the university, making any overview of the history of film theory a disjunctive one. A few early theorists wrote books, yet equally important theoretical contributions were made in journals, essays, and lectures. Some early writers on film were critics of other art forms or scholars in other disciplines, and many were filmmakers who shared their ideas and excitement about the developing medium with one another in specialized publications. Film theorists since the inception of the medium have examined the following questions:

- Is cinema an art form? How does it relate to photography, painting, theater, music, and other art forms?
- Does film resemble language or have a language of its own?
- Is film's primary responsibility to tell a story?
- Is film by nature a realist medium?
- What is the place of film in the modern world that fostered its development?

Two noteworthy books on movies appeared in the United States as early as the 1910s. Poet Vachel Lindsay's *The Art of the Moving Picture* (1915) responded enthusiastically to the novelty and the democratizing potential of the medium. "I am the one poet who has a right to claim for his muses Blanche Sweet, Mary Pickford, and Mae Marsh," he stated, invoking the popular movie stars of the day. In his idiosyncratic but suggestive book, Lindsay likened film

language to hieroglyphics. This metaphor of picture writing reflected cinema's promise of universality, which excited many early observers.

A more systematic elaboration of ideas about cinema was contributed by Harvard University psychologist Hugo Münsterberg in *The Photoplay: A Psychological Study* (1916). For Münsterberg, viewing films was linked to the subjective process of thinking. The properties of cinema that distinguished it from the physical reality to which its images referred made it interesting aesthetically and psychologically. Unlike watching a play, watching movies requires specific mental activities to make sense of cues of movement and depth. "The photoplay tells us the human story by overcoming the forms of the outer world, namely, space, time, and causality, and by adjusting the events to the forms of the inner world, namely, attention, memory, imagination, and emotion," wrote Münsterberg. His ideas thus emphasize the viewer's mental interaction with the medium. Decades later, theories of spectatorship did the same. Lindsay's work praised specific films, but Münsterberg referred to the photoplay in general. In a sense, their works mark the division between criticism, which reflects on a given aesthetic object, and theory, which is broader and more abstract.

Outside the United States, much early writing about cinema came from filmmakers themselves. Although movies immediately became commercialized, they emerged and flourished in the context of

modernist experimentation in the arts — music, writing, theater, painting, architecture, and photography. Because film was based on new technology, many considered it an exemplary art for the machine age. Film influenced new approaches to established media, such as cubism in painting and the "automatic writing" of the surrealists. In turn, filmmakers adopted avant-garde practices, and painters like Hans Richter took up filmmaking to explore graphic and rhythmic possibilities. Modernist intellectuals debated cinema's aesthetic status and its relationship to the other arts.

French impressionist cinema was an avant-garde film movement of the late 1910s and 1920s that aimed to destabilize familiar or objective ways of seeing through cinema. The movement was fostered by groups known as ciné clubs and by journals dedicated to the new medium. In *Cinéma*, Louis Delluc coined the term **photogénie** to refer to a particular quality that distinguishes the filmed object from its everyday reality. Jean Epstein elaborated on this elusive concept in poetic writings such as "Bonjour Cinéma" and in his film adaptation of Edgar Allan Poe's story *The Fall of the House of Usher* (1928). Another key filmmaker of the period, Germaine Dulac, compared film to music in her extensive writings and lectures. Film theory and practice began to flourish jointly during this time and continued to develop in tandem in the period between the world wars **[Figure 11.4]**.

The cover of a magazine, Mon Ciné, features Germaine Dulac.

Figure 11.4 ***Mon Ciné.*** Filmmaker, theorist, and feminist writer Germaine Dulac (pictured here on the cover of *Mon Ciné* magazine on October 25, 1923) was a key figure in French avant-garde cinema of the 1920s.

Classical Film Theories: Formalism and Realism

Intellectual interest in the medium of film and its relation to contemporary times intensified as its technological and industrial organization, social role, and dominant styles solidified in the 1920s. Art historians like Rudolf Arnheim and Erwin Panofsky and film practitioners produced significant essays and full-length books on film theory. Although many film theorists sought to define the formal elements of film and their effects, both for practical reasons and to enter into debate with traditional theories of aesthetics, others held that the medium's appeal to realism was fundamental. Traditionally these positions are opposed to each other as **formalism**, a critical approach to cinema that emphasizes formal properties of the text or medium over content or context, and **realism**, which emphasizes the connection or quality of resemblance to the natural world.

Stories about the presentation of the Lumière brothers' film at the Grand Café in Paris invariably describe audiences that shrank from the arriving train or feared they would be splashed by ocean waves **[Figure 11.5]**. Such stories characterize cinema as realist and lacking the aesthetic distance of the other arts.

A still from the black-and-white movie, Arrival of a Train at La Ciotat, shows a train pulling into a station where a crowd waits.

11.5 ***Arrival of a Train at La Ciotat*** (1896). The account of audiences running from the moving train at the first public film screening is a foundational myth of film history.

As we shall see, for realist theorists such as André Bazin and Siegfried Kracauer, film, like photography, was distinct because of its referential quality — its ability to refer to the world through images that resemble and record the presence of objects and sources of sounds. For formalists like Sergei Eisenstein and Béla Balázs, cinema is an art. Editing and close-ups are the basis of film's meanings and effects; realism is only a style that uses form in a particular way. Another approach to form can be found in the work of Walter Benjamin, who was interested in the way that film affects the sensory perception of the viewer. Although the debates between these positions became quite polemical, neither one prevailed. The tension between the formal and realist properties of the medium remains at the heart of film theory.

Formalist Theories

Although some theorists might postulate that cinema is defined by some ineffable essence, most would characterize it by its form. In classical film theory, formalists looked to unique capabilities of cinema — such as camera movement and distance and shot duration and rhythm — to find meaning in the work itself. Some correlated aspects of film, like editing, to the fragmented experiences of modern life. Much of this work is indebted to influential theorist-filmmakers like Sergei Eisenstein.

Soviet Montage Theory

As is detailed in the discussion of editing in Chapter 5, the montage theory of Eisenstein and other Soviet filmmakers of the 1920s has shaped both film practice and film theory. The 1917 Russian Revolution catalyzed a group of artist-intellectuals to develop formal means to express a new social order. Stylistic innovations in graphic and set design, painting, and sculpture were synthesized in the new medium of cinema, which, with its technological base and populist reach, was celebrated as a perfect expression of communist modernization. Lev Kuleshov's teaching at the state film school, where Vsevolod Pudovkin and Sergei Eisenstein were his students, put the theory of montage at the center of Soviet filmmaking. In *Mother* (1926) **[Figure 11.6]** and other films, Pudovkin used montage to break down a scene to direct the spectator's look and understanding. In contrast, Eisenstein's theory of montage, outlined in one of the most significant bodies of writing in film theory, emphasized the effects of collision between shots. Soviet filmmaker Dziga Vertov also contributed to film theory in the form of manifestos signed by the Kinoki, or "cinema-eye" group. Vertov's avant-garde writings emphasized the new way of seeing made possible by the movie camera's ability to overcome the limitations of the human eye. He rejected the fiction film in favor of "life caught unawares" and was an early experimenter with the possibilities of sound.

A still from the black-and-white movie, Mother, shows a woman holding a flag.

11.6 ***Mother*** (1926). Like other Soviet filmmakers, Vsevolod Pudovkin emphasized the power of montage. But although Eisenstein favored dissonant effects, Pudovkin pioneered the

orchestration of emotion through cutting, as in this powerful adaptation of Maxim Gorky's novel.

Film Aesthetics

Like the Soviet montage theorists, Béla Balázs and Rudolf Arnheim championed formalist theories of film. Balázs, best known for his book *Theory of the Film* (1952), was a Hungarian screenwriter and film critic who also worked in the Soviet Union and published his first book of film theory in 1924. Balázs argues that film broke with the theater and the other arts by allowing for viewer identification. In watching a movie, he writes, "we look up to Juliet's balcony with Romeo's eyes and look down on Romeo with Juliet's." In particular, Balázs wrote eloquently on the power of the close-up, an element of film art impossible to approximate onstage: "by means of the close-up the camera in the days of the silent film revealed also the hidden main-springs of a life which we had thought we already knew so well" **[Figure 11.7]**.

A still from the movie, Hamlet, shows a close-up of Asta Neilsen looking to the side.

11.7 Asta Nielsen as *Hamlet* (1921). Theorist Béla Balázs believed the close-up could reveal the soul onscreen and wrote eloquently about Danish silent film star Asta Nielsen's face in close-up.

German art historian Rudolf Arnheim argued even more strongly for a formalist position in his 1933 study *Film*, which was later revised for English publication as *Film as Art* (1957). For Arnheim, the quest for film realism is a betrayal of the unique aesthetic properties of the medium that allow it to transcend the imitation of nature. He set out to "refute the assertion that film is nothing but the feeble mechanical reproduction of real life." For example, his assertation that "film pictures are at once plane and solid" was not a limitation but an aesthetic parameter to be exploited by filmmakers and recognized by theorists. Like Münsterberg, Arnheim was interested in the psychology of perception and did not value the quality of resemblance above other responses to images.

Film and Modernity

The theorist Walter Benjamin was particularly interested in how cinema participated in the transformation of human perception. Benjamin wrote about cinema as well as photography in his famous 1935 essay, "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility." For Benjamin, the comparison of photography and film with painting does not hinge on their relative artistic value. Rather, they differ because these new art forms do not produce unique objects with the "aura" of an original artwork. Instead, film captures, in multiple widely circulating copies, the sense of accelerated time and effortlessly traversed space typical of

contemporary urban life. Benjamin regarded the distracted state of the film viewer as both a response to its formal properties and characteristic of the historical moment.

Realism

Formalist positions dominated in the 1920s, but the question of realism emerged soon after as the central debate of classical film theory. The momentous technical development of synchronized sound was accompanied by new speculation on the nature of the medium: does sound allow film to fulfill a mission to reproduce the world as it is, or does sound hinder cinema's visual expression? Realism, generally speaking, serves the aim of **mimesis**, or imitation of reality, in the arts. The mimetic quality has been valued in the Western artistic tradition since ancient Greece. If the formalists saw the film screen as akin to a picture frame, the realists saw it as a window.

During and after World War II, a reconsideration of realism was prompted by political events as well as by technical innovations and new filmmaking movements. One of the most prominent film critics and theorists of the 1950s and 1960s, André Bazin, saw film as quintessentially realist, a medium "in which the image is evaluated not according to what it adds to reality but what it reveals of it." Bazin responded directly to the formalists who preceded him, and he serves as an important predecessor of contemporary film studies

in turn (Bazin's influence through *Cahiers du cinéma* is discussed later in this chapter).

In his essay "The Evolution of the Language of Cinema" (1950–1955), Bazin expresses the view that cinema's essence lies in its ability to capture a space and event in real time. Montage interferes with this vocation, he argues, by altering spatial and temporal relationships. He advocates instead for scenes conveyed through composition in depth, made possible by deep-focus cinematography using wide-angle lenses. If all planes of the image can be kept in view, cutting between shots taken from different distances is less necessary. For Bazin, a filmmaker like Jean Renoir, who staged scenes in depth using long takes, conveys "respect for the continuity of dramatic space and, of course, of its duration." Bazin sees the image as a reference to both reality and the viewer's presence — and ultimately as a means of transcending time.

Another formidable thinker on film, Siegfried Kracauer, is, like Bazin, best known for his strong advocacy of realism, although Kracauer's position evolved over time. In the 1920s, he began writing newspaper essays in Weimar Germany amid modernist experimentation with film form. In "The Mass Ornament" (1927), Kracauer explores the aesthetics of mass culture and the new rhythms of life it inspired **[Figure 11.8]**, and in 1947 he published *From Caligari to Hitler*, an influential study subtitled "a psychological history of the German film." In 1960, he elaborated his views on

film's capacity for realism in his major work, *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality*. In this work, Kracauer argues that the cinematic medium "is uniquely equipped to record and reveal physical reality." Not only does film provide a window on the phenomenal world, but more important for Kracauer, film also preserves what otherwise would be destroyed — the momentary, the everyday, the random.

A still from the black-and-white movie, Footlight Parade, shows numerous chorus girls performing on a conical series of raised platforms on stage.

11.8 ***Footlight Parade*** (1933). In his writings of the 1920s and early 1930s, Siegfried Kracauer cites the almost abstract patterns of chorus girls in performance as examples of what he calls “mass ornament.”

Postwar Film Culture and Criticism

Film theorists' renewed interest in cinematic realism was shaped by the devastating events of World War II and its aftermath. Kracauer's experience as a German Jewish refugee influenced his views on cinema as a kind of historical evidence. Bazin, an activist Roman Catholic and member of the French Resistance, invested film with similar redemptive properties. For example, Bazin valued the postwar Italian neorealist movement — exemplified in films like *Germany Year Zero* (1948) with its amateur actors showing the hardships of postwar existence in actual locations **[Figure 11.9]** — because it demonstrates what Bazin calls "faith in reality."

A still shows a man crossing a railway track next to a bombed building in a scene from the black-and-white movie, Germany Year Zero.

11.9 ***Germany Year Zero*** (1948). For André Bazin, Roberto Rossellini's film, set on location in postwar Berlin, puts its "faith in reality."

In the period of recovery from the trauma and destruction of the war, neorealism led a vigorous resurgence of international film culture. The new art cinema was supported by a network of film festivals and journals. Film theory could not have taken hold without the flurry of filmmaking and lively debates of this period.

Film Journals

Analyze a recent film you viewed from a realist position. Can you identify a scene that might support André Bazin's ideas about the long take or Siegfried Kracauer's ideas about photography's power to capture the everyday?

Perhaps the most famous postwar film journal, *Cahiers du cinéma*, was cofounded by Bazin in 1951 **[Figure 11.10]**. Under Bazin's mentorship, the magazine published the criticism of the young cineastes — François Truffaut, Jean-Luc Godard, Eric Rohmer, Jacques Rivette, and Claude Chabrol — who shaped the French New Wave (see Chapter 2). These writers were getting much of their film education at the Cinémathèque Française, where Henri Langlois screened an eclectic menu of world film — including the hundreds of American studio films that could not be released in France during the Vichy period. The writings of the *Cahiers* critics and the films that they made energized world film culture and lay the groundwork for the emergence of the discipline of film studies in universities.

11.10 ***Polyester*** (1981). In cinephile John Waters's film, Divine reads an issue of the French film journal that introduced auteur theory in the 1950s.

Rival journals in France, *Positif* and *Cinéthique*, also flourished, and the polemics among them catalyzed film enthusiasts. Publications like *Movie* in England and the English-language *Cahiers du cinéma*, edited by Andrew Sarris in New York, disseminated French criticism and the auteur theory. In the United States, *Film Culture* was at the heart of the avant-garde New American cinema movement in the 1950s and 1960s, and the University of California's *Film Quarterly*, published under that title since 1958, introduced many key ideas of film theory.

After the cultural upheavals provoked by general strikes in France in May 1968, *Cahiers du cinéma* became both more political and more theoretical, with collectively written editorials and in-depth analyses

of ideology and form in films like *Young Mr. Lincoln* (1939). In the 1970s, writers for the British journal *Screen* introduced the Marxist, semiotic, and psychoanalytic language and ideas from France that permeated Anglo-American cinema studies for more than a decade. Writing on film was not limited to periodicals. Monographs and series on individual directors, national cinemas, and genres proliferated. Many of these low-cost, portable "little books" combined the popular and the scholarly and encouraged the development of academic publishing in the field.

Auteur Theory

The ideas cultivated in these publications informed both popular criticism and academic theory. **Auteur theory** is an approach to cinema first proposed in *Cahiers du cinéma* that emphasizes the director as the expressive force behind a film and sees a director's body of work as united by common themes or formal strategies. It emerged in the 1950s when specific directors were vocally championed by the French critics. The retention of the French word *auteur* in English marks this origin. *Cahiers du cinéma* promoted what its writers called *la politique des auteurs* — a "policy" (or doctrine) of authors — singling out for praise such filmmakers as Orson Welles, Fritz Lang, Samuel Fuller, and Robert Bresson, whose distinct styles made their films immediately identifiable. European art cinema was in its ascendance, with figures like Ingmar Bergman and Michelangelo Antonioni fitting the definition of an auteur as an

autonomous writer-director. Yet *Cahiers du cinéma*'s concept of authorship was also applied to a group of filmmakers for whom the idea of such conscious and consistent creative artistry seemed less appropriate — directors working in the heyday of the Hollywood studio system.

Critics argued that Hollywood auteurs such as Raoul Walsh and Howard Hawks left their signature on their films in the form of characteristic motifs or striking compositions, defying studio constraints on artistic autonomy in favor of market considerations. Debates arose over whether a particular director should be classified a true auteur or a mere **metteur-en-scène**, the French term for *director* that here denotes a mere "stager" or stylist whose technical competence is not marked by the strong individual vision of the auteur. In America, auteur theory was popularized by Andrew Sarris in *Film Culture*, the *Village Voice*, and his 1968 collection *The American Cinema: Directors and Directions, 1929–1968*. Sarris includes Hawks, Charlie Chaplin, Welles, and John Ford in what he calls the "pantheon," while deflating the reputations of Academy Award–winners like William Wyler. In Sarris's hierarchy of Hollywood talent, the judgment of the critic prevails in assigning relative status to directors. Like that of the French critics, Sarris's work depends on a deep **cinephilia**, or love of cinema, and an almost exhaustive knowledge of the major and minor films released throughout the previous several decades. Sarris's rendering of the phrase *la politique des auteurs* as "auteur theory" in English is somewhat misleading. It

is less a fully worked-out theory than a critical method, and its political connotation is lost in translation.

The auteurist approach tends to minimize the fact that cinema is a collaborative, commercial, and highly technologically mediated form. Making a film is not as personal as authoring a poem, and because many individuals contribute to a film, it can be hard to assign credit to a single authorial vision, especially in studio-produced work. Critic Pauline Kael spoke out against Sarris's ideas and argued that writer Herman Mankiewicz rather than Orson Welles should be credited for coming up with *Citizen Kane*'s (1941) original structure and that cinematographer Gregg Toland's work distinguishes the film's look. In commercial cinema, a producer, studio, or franchise may be more important than a director. Today a director credit such as "a J. J. Abrams film" may be a matter of contractual obligations and financial arrangements. Film theorist (and coauthor of this book) Timothy Corrigan discusses the contemporary use of the director as brand as "the commerce of auteurism." Perhaps the biggest challenge to auteurism is that it recounts film history through the contributions of white male creators. Women and people of color were excluded from the director's chair during the heyday of the Hollywood studio system, and the numbers remain very imbalanced in the industry today. For this reason, the concept of authorship, when applied to underrepresented groups, becomes about more than individual vision. It points to historical exclusions and conditions of labor and

to the important relationship between filmmakers and the audiences they represent and address.

Genre Theory

In film, **genre criticism**, like auteur theory, was invigorated by the film culture of post–World War II France when American films that had not been released during that country's occupation by Germany were finally exhibited all at once, and usually without subtitles, making commonalities easy to identify. Like auteur criticism, genre criticism depends on cinephilia. Making critical judgments based on only a few films would be imprudent, genre critics argue.

Because different genres work out different cultural questions or problems, they tend to emerge and decline in particular periods. Critic Thomas Schatz, in his 1981 book *Hollywood Genres: Formulas, Filmmaking, and the Studio System*, for example, sees musicals as celebrating cultural integration, often symbolized by the couple coming together, whereas westerns move toward the establishment of a home, one that the wandering hero cannot himself enjoy.

American philosopher Stanley Cavell uses genre to frame his arguments about film as a form of thinking. In *Pursuits of Happiness: The Hollywood Comedy of Remarriage*, he understands the remarriage plot common in screwball comedies as a way of posing central questions about what it means to be human; in *Contesting Tears: The*

Hollywood Melodrama of the Unknown Woman, he argues that similar questions posed by melodrama receive different answers in the figure of the "unknown woman."

Contemporary Film Theory

By the 1970s, film studies had become an established discipline, with strong footholds in English and art history programs as well as its own academic departments, societies, and journals. During this time, the vocabulary of film theory became very specialized. Although the terminology can initially be intimidating, it was developed to offer a more systematic approach to cinema than the often subjective and impressionistic legacy of film criticism.

The following overview of contemporary film theory is organized according to major critical schools within the discipline. There are important interrelationships among these schools, and often one set of questions grows out of another. For example, when feminist film theory looks at our unconscious identification with characters onscreen, it overlaps with psychoanalytic theory. When it looks at how some genres are associated with female viewers, it overlaps with cultural studies. However, establishing the evolution of and broad outlines for each area of contemporary film theory is a useful way to raise questions for further study.

Structuralism and Semiotics

Structuralism and semiotics were extremely important to the emergence of the field of film studies. These two schools of thought

sought to understand film as an important social force as well as a specifically audiovisual form of communication. In a 1968 essay, French literary critic Roland Barthes declared "the death of the author," arguing that the artist's conscious intention and biography should be set aside in favor of an encounter with the qualities of the text itself. Just when auteur theory had extended the cultural prestige of the literary author to filmmakers, literary critics were calling into question the traditional notion of authorial genius. These new perspectives had their roots in **structuralism**, an approach to linguistics and anthropology that, when extended to literary and filmic narratives, looks for common structures rather than artistic originality.

The origins of structuralism lie in the structural linguistics of Ferdinand de Saussure in the early part of the twentieth century, and the approach was widely influential in French thought in the 1960s. Because of this linguistic influence, film theorists compared the medium to language. For Saussure, linguistics was the most exemplary case of a new science of signs he called semiology, which included pictures, gestures, and many other systems of communication. Semiology or **semiotics** is the study of signs and signification. It posits that meaning is constructed and communicated through the selection, ordering, and interpretation of signs. A **sign** is something that signifies something else, whether the connection is causal, conventional, or based on resemblance. For Saussure, a sign is composed of a **signifier** (a spoken or written word, picture, or gesture) and a **signified** (the mental concept

evoked by a signifier). Together, the signifier *c-a-t* and the signified mental image of a domesticated feline form a sign, and the two parts cannot be imagined without each other. In a particular instance, the sign *cat* might refer to a specific feline, which would be its **referent**, the thing for which a sign stands. The analyst looks at the gap between the referent and the sign and the distinction between the signifier and the signified in order to isolate general rules or **codes** that apply to specific instances of communication or **messages**. The code of language, for example, allows English speakers and listeners to share the meaning of the word *winter* as one of four seasons, its **denotation** (the literal meaning of a word). Cultural codes, however, are responsible for the **connotations** of cold and snow, the associations connected with a word or sign.

For C. S. Peirce, the American philosopher who in the late nineteenth century coined the term *semiotics*, there are three varieties of signs — **symbol**, **icon**, and **index**. A symbolic sign (such as a word) has an arbitrary relationship to its referent that is assigned by language, which originates in culture. An iconic sign (such as a photograph or film) signifies its referents through a relationship of resemblance. Finally, an indexical sign (such as a footprint that indicates a person walked on a path or a weathervane that points in the direction the wind blows) has a direct causal relationship with the object depicted. This relationship can be likened to pointing or indicating, which is implied by the word *index*. An indexical sign like a photographic image is a product of a

process in which light is reflected from an object and produces an image that is fixed by the chemical emulsion on film.

Pictures, especially photographs and film or video images (which are iconic and indexical signs), are often identified more strongly with their referents than are words (symbolic signs), which are connected to what they designate by convention only. In his famous painting *The Treachery of Images* (1929), René Magritte painted the words "*Ceci n'est pas une pipe*" ("This is not a pipe") under the image of a pipe. At first glance, the words seem absurd because they seem to refer to what is unmistakably a picture of a pipe. But a picture of a pipe is not a real pipe you would hold and use to smoke tobacco; it is merely its iconic sign. No essential nature of an object is captured in a sign, of whatever kind. Semiotics stresses language as a human invention and social convention, and the ways that these conventions have been described by linguistics' scientific methodology have allowed theorists to approach cinema systematically rather than subjectively and evaluatively. Semiotic methods of formal analysis are based on these systematic attempts at understanding. Theorists identify how cinematic codes (such as camera movements and lighting) create meaningful patterns in specific films and across genres.

The legacy of linguistics has also been felt in theories of film narrative. Building on Ferdinand de Saussure's structural linguistics, French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss titled his important 1957

work *Structural Anthropology*. Lévi-Strauss studied thousands of myths and discovered that they share basic structures that help shape cultural life. Russian folklorist Vladimir Propp noticed a similar unity in his study of hundreds of folktales. He found that many different plots had in common a limited number of characters performing a limited number of functions in the same order. These basic elements are echoed in many other narrative forms.

Narratology — the study of narrative forms — is a branch of structuralism that encompasses stories of all kinds, including films. Are there a limited number of basic plot elements available to filmmakers? Are genres like myths? Because movies are so formulaic and so strikingly similar to myths and folktales even when not explicitly based on them, narratological studies had fruitful results. The characters in the *Star Wars* series (1977–2019), for example, closely match the heroes, antiheroes, magical helpers, princesses, and witches of the folktales Propp studied **[Figure 11.11]**.

11.11 ***Star Wars: Episode IV — A New Hope*** (1977). George Lucas acknowledged that mythologist Joseph Campbell influenced him in creating the plot of the first *Star Wars* (1977) movie. Narratologists would recognize the *dramatis personae* of the hero, the helper, and the princess in the film's main characters.

VIEWING CUE

Watch the online clip of *The Wizard of Oz* (1939), and consider how its plot resembles a fairy tale.

The linguists known as the Russian formalists, contemporaries of Sergei Eisenstein and Vladimir Propp, contributed the important distinction between plot and story (addressed in Chapter 7) to the study of narrative. In their terms, *syuzhet* (plot) refers to the way events are selected and arranged in the actual tale or film, and *fabula* (story) refers to the chronologically ordered sequence of events as we rationally reconstruct it. For example, a detective story's *syuzhet* follows the detective's progress through the investigation. Its *fabula* commences with the circumstances leading up to the committing of the crime.

Structuralist theorists reduce narrative to its most basic form: an opening situation is disrupted, a hero takes action as a result, and a new equilibrium is reached at the end. The novel, the distinctive middle-class cultural form of the nineteenth century, gave the hero

psychological depth within a realistic field of action. These novelistic qualities were adopted by motion pictures, whose realist capacity reinforced them as norms. Film theorists drew on structuralism, semiotics, and the formalist positions of classical film theory to identify the conventions of classical narrative form and realism as a dominant, but not inevitable, form of cinema.

Ideological Critique

Influenced by Marxist theory, contemporary film theory used structuralism and semiotics as tools to critique ideologies seen to be underlying both the content and the dominant form of motion pictures. For example, a structuralist reading of the musical *Singin' in the Rain* (1952) that is critical of its ideological message would show that the technology and labor involved in making a Hollywood film are subordinated to the film's romance plot. Marxism is most immediately understood as a political and economic discourse that looks at history and society in terms of unequal class relations. But French thought — catalyzed by the radical social disruptions, political protests, and intellectual currents of the late 1960s — brought Marxism to bear on cultural forms like film.

Louis Althusser approached the traditional Marxist question of the nature of **ideology** — a systematic set of beliefs that are not necessarily conscious or acknowledged — with a new explanation of how people come to accept ideas and conditions that are contrary to

their interests. Althusser defined ideology as “the imaginary representation of the real relations in which we live.” According to him, real relations (such as paid work that contributes to the profits of others) disempower working people in the interests of the ruling class, and our imaginary representations (that this is the way things are supposed to be, according to narratives such as the evening news and Hollywood genre films) make this powerlessness seem inevitable and tolerable.

For the critics at *Cahiers du cinéma*, film became an important test of Althusser’s theories about ideology because it affects viewers’ beliefs on an unconscious level. In their 1969 editorial for the journal, Jean-Louis Comolli and Jean Narboni examined varieties of film practice and classified films in seven categories (from a to g) according to their relationship with the “dominant ideology.” “Category a” films are those Comolli and Narboni perceived as most politically and formally consistent with the dominant ideology. “Category b” films include those that break with the dominant ideology on the level of content (for example, films that portrayed decolonization and the conflict over U.S. involvement in Vietnam) and on the level of form (for example, experimental films that disturb easy viewing processes).

VIEWING CUE

Does the film you are watching put forth a clear ideological position? Are there ways to see conflicting positions in it?

But Comolli and Narboni's editorial set an even more lasting agenda for film theory in their practice of ideological critique. They used "category e" to designate Hollywood films that seem to uphold the status quo but that present formal excesses or internal contradictions that register the stresses and strains of trying to make the dominant ideology seem inevitable. Careful viewers can read these codes and see the film as a representation of or argument about the social world rather than as an unchangeable reality. Soon, other critics followed Comolli and Narboni's lead in reading films in this way. In these readings, critics found the films of studio-era auteur Douglas Sirk's 1950s melodramas — *All That Heaven Allows* (1955), for example — to be too color-coordinated, his characters too hysterical, and their environments too crammed with artificial commodities to be taken at face value **[Figure 11.12]**. These glossy surfaces were seen to be cracking under the brittle hypocrisies — anti-Communist hysteria, repression of the civil rights of African Americans, and the enforcement of restrictive gender roles and sexual codes that had been challenged during the war — of the prosperous, Eisenhower-era America they depicted. Sirk's films are what these critics called "progressive texts." They leave us with an uneasy feeling that can be taken as a critique of dominant ideology. This subtle and sometimes wishful approach is known as "symptomatic reading" and is a fruitful legacy of Althusser's ideological critique in contemporary film theory.

11.12 ***All That Heaven Allows*** (1955). Critics regarded Douglas Sirk's melodramas as "progressive texts" whose formal excesses and improbable situations showed the cracks in Eisenhower-era America's facade of prosperity and social consensus.

Poststructuralism

As the term implies, **poststructuralism** was an intellectual development that challenged the methodology and fixed definitions of structuralism. It did so by emphasizing the place of subjectivity, the unreliability of language, and the role of social power in cultural forms. It included many distinct areas of thought, including psychoanalytic, postcolonial, and feminist theory. Poststructuralism asked us to reconsider truths and hierarchies normally taken for granted. For example, our implicit standard that a satisfying film ties up all its loose ends is a structuralist position that posits closure as a

basic narrative element. Poststructuralism countered that closure is a relative quality and stresses the open-endedness of stories. What happens if we daydream about the characters we have been introduced to or pick up on the relationship between a film and topical events?

As an intellectual movement, poststructuralism was a great deal messier than structuralism. Whereas structuralism attempted to be systematic by looking for transhistorical common patterns into which specific data could fit, poststructuralism questioned structuralism's assumption of objectivity and its disregard for cultural and historical context. A shorthand definition might be "structuralism + subjectivity = poststructuralism." Much of contemporary film theory remains poststructuralist in orientation because it explores the intersection of subjectivity with film structures. This is primarily done through drawing on the insights of psychoanalytic theory.

Psychoanalysis

Psychoanalytic theory comes into play in describing the psychic processes we undergo when experiencing the film illusion. When we watch films in a movie theater, we are immobile and surrounded in darkness and become absorbed in a larger-than-life image. Identification, desire, and disavowal of the illusory quality of the

image are some of the processes that are activated as we watch a film.

Film theory was greatly affected by the ways French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan described human subjectivity. Images were central to his account. In his teachings from the 1950s through his death in 1981, Lacan spoke of three domains of psychic experience: the "imaginary realm" deals in images, the "symbolic realm" is the domain of language, and the "real" is experienced as a trauma that cannot be directly represented. For Lacanian film theorists, people relate to pictures (the imaginary) in a powerful way that is rooted in one of the earliest images to leave an impression on us — our own reflection in the mirror. In the mirror stage, the infant comes to recognize himself or herself as a human individual, but this recognition is also a "misrecognition" because it is routed through an image that is an illusion.

Lacanian film theorists like Jean-Louis Baudry and Christian Metz likened this early sense of self, which is both powerful and illusory, to the experience of viewing a film and "believing" in its world. This sense of power in enhanced by the way that films portray stars and characters with physical powers superior to ours and with whom we identify **[Figure 11.13]**. Although the symbolic and the real also come into play in our encounters with movies, the imaginary accounts for their power. This dimension of the film experience was elaborated by analogy with the viewing process itself.

11.13 *Captain Marvel* (2019). The transformation from human to superhero facilitates the audience's identification with movie characters who are idealized versions of themselves.

Apparatus Theory

In Plato's parable of the cave, people are chained underground watching shadows on the wall and do not know that what they see is not real. Film theorist Jean-Louis Baudry saw the cinema as similar to the cave — as an ideological mechanism that is based in a physical set of technologies that has the power to convince us that an illusion is real. He uses the term *apparatus* to argue that the arrangement of movie equipment (such as the hidden projector and the illuminated screen) influences our unconscious receptivity to the image and to ideology — as if we, too, are trapped in Plato's cave.

Apparatus theory argues that the very mechanics on which film is based — including cameras, projectors, and screens — were developed according to certain ideologies that then are reproduced

in the viewing experience. It explores the values built into film technologies through the context of the medium's historical development. The camera's monocular (single-eyed) perspective is based on the values of human-scaled Renaissance art, in which the viewer stands at the point where perspective lines converge. Apparatus theory asserts that this position is not neutral but embodies Western cultural values — like anthropocentrism (human-centeredness), individualism, possessiveness, and the elevation of the visual over other senses. A culture that did not put the possessive individual at the center of representation — a culture that equally valued animals and people, for example, or senses other than sight in the arts — might never have developed the technology of photography.

The film viewer is in the same perspectival position as the camera that filmed the image and can thus imagine himself or herself as the originator or possessor of the illusion on the screen. This sense of one's self is double-edged. According to poststructuralism, an individual who stands in front of a Renaissance painting or watches a classical Hollywood movie is "subjected" to the apparatus's positioning and is granted his or her "subjectivity" or sense of self only in these predetermined conditions.

Theorists argue that subjects are constituted through language or through other acts of signification (meaning making), such as film. For example, the word *I* has no definite meaning until it is used by

someone in a conversation, and its meaning shifts as each speaker in the conversation uses *I* to refer to himself or herself. In turn, because viewers cannot "talk back" when they watch a movie (as they can with video games, websites, and interactive films), they can be said to be constituted only as the object of the film's address: they are meant to laugh, cry, or put together clues as the film unfolds.

Spectatorship

How audiences interact with films and with the cinematic apparatus is addressed through the theory of **spectatorship** — the process of film viewing. Spectatorship has been a concern in film theory since Münsterberg, who used psychology to explain the mind's role in making sense of movies. In the poststructuralist theory of the 1970s, spectatorship stood at the convergence of theories of language, subjectivity, psychoanalysis, and ideology.

VIEWING CUE

Consider your experience as a spectator of the film screened most recently for class. Did you relate to the point of view of a particular character, or was your perspective more omniscient? Were you aware of the apparatus (camera, projector, screen)?

Christian Metz was one of the most prolific and influential contemporary promoters of spectatorship theory. In his book *The*

Imaginary Signifier: Psychoanalysis and the Cinema (1977), he argues that film's strong perceptual presence — giant images projected in a dark room with immersive sound — makes it an almost hallucinatory experience. Going to the movies gratifies our voyeurism (looking without being seen ourselves) and plays to our unconscious self-image of power. It is as if what is shown on the screen is made possible by our presence. The work of Metz and other French theorists appeared in translation in the influential English journal *Screen* in the early 1970s, and the great influence of what is sometimes known as *screen theory* on the field led to the specialized use of the term *spectatorship* to indicate these psychoanalytically informed theories.

Theories of Gender and Sexuality

The poststructuralist account of spectatorship and subjectivity remains abstract if given only in general terms. In psychoanalytic theory, subjectivity is understood as constructed by familial models and wider cultural influences, even when normative gender roles are resisted. Theories of gender and sexuality have been integral to film theory's exploration of how subjectivity is engaged by and constructed in cinema.

Feminist Film Theory

As feminism began to have wide social and intellectual currency in the 1970s, commentators noted ways that female and male images were treated differently in film. In advertising, pornography, and painting, the objectification of the female image seemed to solicit a possessive, implicitly male gaze. In film, feminist critics noted, the spectator was envisioned in a similarly gendered way. "Is the gaze male?" asked E. Ann Kaplan in a 1983 essay of the same title, noting that vision in our culture is often associated with traits of ownership and power that are typically seen as male.

British theorist and filmmaker Laura Mulvey's "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," published in *Screen* in 1975, is considered by many to be the most important essay in contemporary film theory. Arguing that psychoanalysis offers a compelling account of how the differences between the sexes are culturally determined, Mulvey applied this account to cinema as a cultural institution enforcing such differences. She observes that the glamorous and desirable female image in film is also a potentially threatening vision of difference, or otherness, for male viewers **[Figure 11.14]**. Hollywood films repeat a pattern of visual mastery of the woman as "other" by attributing the onscreen gaze to a male character who can cover for the camera's voyeurism — its capacity for looking without being seen — and stand in for the male viewer. Film narratives also tend to domesticate or otherwise tame the woman, Mulvey showed, offering analyses of Alfred Hitchcock's *Vertigo* (1958) and *Rear Window* (1954), whose stories are driven by voyeurism and involve makeovers of

their central female characters. Essentially, Mulvey argues that the standard dichotomy in Hollywood film is "woman as image/man as bearer of the look."

11.14 ***And God Created Woman*** (1956). Brigitte Bardot's character exemplifies what Laura Mulvey calls woman's "to-be-looked-at-ness."

In her essay, Mulvey championed "a political use of psychoanalysis" and a style of filmmaking that would "free the look of the camera into its materiality in time and space" so that it cannot be ignored through assimilation to a character's perspective. In their film *Riddles of the Sphinx* (1977), Mulvey and Peter Wollen used 360-degree pans, with the camera positioned at about waist level, to emulate the circularity of a young mother's rhythms of work and to avoid objectifying her body in a centered, still image **[Figure 11.15]**. The film deliberately set out to destroy conventional visual pleasure and narrative satisfaction. Like many theorists of this period, Mulvey and Wollen believed that making spectators think about

what they were seeing would lead them to critique the dominant ideology.

11.15 ***Riddles of the Sphinx*** (1977). Laura Mulvey puts her own theories about images of women into practice in a film made with Peter Wollen.

Building on Mulvey's provocative argument, other feminist critics have raised the question of female spectatorship. If narrative cinema successfully positions the viewer to take up a male gaze, why are women historically often the most enthusiastic film viewers? One way to approach this question is to consider films produced with a female audience in mind. During Hollywood's heyday,

“women’s pictures” featured female stars like Bette Davis and Joan Crawford, who had a strong appeal to women. At first glance, women’s pleasure in these films seems self-defeating: what these heroines seem to do best is suffer. In the maternal melodrama, for example, a mother suffers by being separated from or rejected by her children. However, feminists argued that a film like *Now, Voyager* (1942) enables female spectators to explore their own dissatisfaction with their lives by fantasizing a more fulfilling version of that existence. The movie shows Davis as a dowdy spinster taking control of her life — through psychoanalytic treatment, romance, and new clothes.

Today’s commercial films aimed at women are not that different from those of the 1940s. Many feminist critics argue that women’s pleasure in these complicated, mixed-message movies should be taken seriously. Because film is a mass medium, it will never radically challenge existing power relations, but if it speaks to women’s dilemmas, it is doing more than much official culture does. Sometimes filmmakers succeed in evoking these emotions and mass cultural traditions in more reflexive and satisfying ways, such as in Pedro Almodóvar’s revisiting of maternal melodramas in *All About My Mother* (1999) and *Volver* (2006) **[Figure 11.16]**.

11.16 ***Volver*** (2006). Pedro Almodóvar revisits the Hollywood genre of the maternal melodrama in this family story, empowering his female characters.

Overall, feminism has affected the relatively young discipline of film theory more than it has affected more established ones. Arguably, gender in film cannot be ignored. As Mulvey's work suggests, cinema — certainly entertainment film but also the avant-garde — depends on stylized images of women for its appeal. Moreover, the cinema, because it is part of the fabric of daily life, necessarily comments on the everyday, private sphere of gender relations. Feminism's significant inroads in film theory have laid the groundwork for related, though not always parallel, critiques of cinema's deployment of sexuality, race, and national identity.

Queer Theory

Feminist theory and psychoanalytic theory stress that unconscious processes (such as desire and identification) are at play when we go

to the movies. Like cinema itself, however, psychoanalysis historically concentrates on heterosexual scenarios (such as the Oedipus complex) and pathologizes gays and lesbians (as cases of "arrested development," for example). Queer film theory critiques and supplements feminist and psychoanalytic approaches, allowing for more flexible ways of seeing and experiencing visual pleasure than are accounted for by the binary opposites — of male versus female, seeing versus seen, and being versus desiring — that are the basis of Mulvey's influential model of spectatorship.

Queer theory challenges Mulvey's assumption that the desiring position is male and the desired one is female, which essentially equates gender difference with sexual desire. The gender of a member of the audience need not correspond with that of the character he or she finds most absorbing or most alluring. Mulvey cites Marlene Dietrich as an example of a "fetish" or mask for the male spectator's desire, but Mulvey does not remark on the lesbian connotations of the star's image. Dietrich cross-dressed for songs in many films and even kissed a woman on the lips in her first American movie, *Morocco* (1930) **[Figure 11.17]**. Dietrich's gender bending needs to be confronted in terms that go beyond psychoanalytic theory. Her onscreen style borrowed directly from the fashions of the lesbian and gay subculture of Weimar-era Germany, where her career began. Dietrich thus appealed on many different levels to lesbian and gay viewers, as well as to heterosexual women and men. In fact, this multiplicity could be seen more

generally as a key to cinema's mass appeal. The theory of gender performativity — the idea that there is no essential content to gender, only a set of cues and codes that must be repeatedly enacted and are then open to change — is illustrated in Dietrich's persona.

11.17 ***Morocco*** (1930). In her influential essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," feminist theorist Laura Mulvey uses Marlene Dietrich's image as an example of a male fetish. Later, queer theorists claimed Dietrich kissing a woman in the nightclub audience as empowering.

Although movies tend to conform to the dominant values of a society (in this case, to heterosexuality as the norm), they also make unconscious appeals to our fantasies, which may not be as

conformist, and the term *queer* captures this antinormative potential. Moreover, films leave room for viewers' own interpretations and appropriations, such as when fan writers continue the adventures of particular mainstream characters or celebrities and share them on the internet. Spectators positioned at the margins, such as gay men and lesbians, often "read against the grain" for cues of performance or mise-en-scène that suggest a story that is different from the one onscreen and has more relevance to their lives. An interest in stars may extend beyond any particular film they are cast in and ignore the film's required romantic outcomes. Queer theory allows for interpretations that value style over content and ambiguity over certainty.

Cultural Studies

Cultural studies is a set of approaches drawn from the humanities and social sciences that considers cultural phenomena in conjunction with processes of production and consumption. This approach scrutinizes aspects of cinema embedded in the everyday lives of individuals or groups at particular historical junctures and in particular social contexts. It does not analyze individual texts in isolation or theorize about spectatorship in the abstract. An interest in audience members' experience of cultural forms builds on Marxist approaches like that of Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, whose essay "The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception" (1944) argues that mass culture dupes its viewers

by churning out movies in the same manner as new cars or brands of toothpaste, with only superficial differences among the products.

A useful way of understanding the fresh approach that cultural studies takes lies in a shift in the definition of "culture." Instead of defining *culture* as great works produced by transcendent artists and appreciated by knowledgeable patrons, cultural studies defines the term anthropologically as "a way of life, including social structures and habits." In other words, cultural studies scholars are interested in how movies are encountered, understood, and "used" in daily experience. We look at a few key approaches within cultural studies — reception theory, star studies, and race and representation.

Reception Theory

Reception theory studies the ways different kinds of audiences regard different kinds of films, focusing on how a film is received by audiences rather than on who made a film or what its thematic content or formal features are. This implies a theory of audiences as active rather than passive. One obvious example is participatory viewing practices, including the costumes and call-and-response of fans in *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* (1975) viewings **[Figure 11.18]**. Reception theory also recognizes that films from the past may be received by today's audiences in entirely new ways. They might root for Native Americans rather than cowboys or might enjoy a

supporting character's subversive wit more than the romance of a pair of bland leads.

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11.18 ***The Rocky Horror Picture Show*** (1975). Scholars of reception theory study participatory audiences and repeat viewers.

Beyond the idiosyncrasies of personal history and circumstances, aspects of each viewer's cultural identity (for instance, age, ethnicity, and educational background) can predispose us toward particular kinds of reception. The homoerotic subtext of *Rebel Without a Cause* (1955) may be more salient to an audience knowledgeable about gay subcultural interest in actors James Dean and Sal Mineo **[Figure 11.19]**. Such an audience can be understood as an **interpretive**

community — group members who share particular knowledge or cultural competence through which a film could be experienced and interpreted. Such responses are sometimes called "situated responses."

11.19 ***Rebel Without a Cause*** (1955). Subcultural knowledge about actor Sal Mineo's gay identity reinforces the film's homoerotic subtext about Plato's feelings for Jim Stark, played by James Dean.

The distinctive West African–derived hairstyles in *Daughters of the Dust* (1991) are more likely to be recognized and enjoyed by black women than by other audience members. Filmmaker Julie Dash intended this special gratification as part of the movie's *address,* its vision of its ideal audience. The citation of these images in *Lemonade* (2016) addresses audience members who are familiar with the classic independent film as well as black female viewers more generally. Theorists see these multiple ways of interacting with a

text as confirmation that individuals actively make meaning even in response to otherwise homogeneous mass media.

The methodologies associated with reception theory include comparing and contrasting reviews drawn from different periodicals, countries, or decades; conducting detailed interviews with viewers; tracking commodity tie-ins (the goods that are marketed with the "brand name" of a particular film or characters); and studying fan activity on the internet. Given the multitude of possible approaches, reception studies has a wide scope.

VIEWING CUE

Conduct a reception study of the film you just viewed by surveying your classmates about which characters and situations they responded to most favorably. Compare and contrast their opinions with those of film reviewers.

Reception studies differs from theories of spectatorship in that it deals with actual audiences rather than a hypothetical subject constructed by the text. Unlike spectatorship, which is concerned with the unconscious patterns evoked by a particular text or by the process of film viewing in the abstract, reception studies addresses actual responses to movies and the behavior of groups. British cultural studies scholar Stuart Hall argues that groups respond to mass culture from their different positions of social empowerment — with a dominant reading, by reacting from the position that the

text slots them into; with a negotiated reading, by accommodating different realities; or with an oppositional reading, by rejecting the framework within which a dominant message is conveyed. African American feminist theorists have developed Hall's concept to account for black women's spectatorship. Jacqueline Bobo studies how viewers who have read Alice Walker's novel *The Color Purple* respond more favorably to the 1985 film adaptation, whereas bell hooks posits that black women have gone so long without adequate representation of their lives that they necessarily wield an **oppositional gaze** when watching mainstream media. Reception studies thus suggests that social identity considerably complicates the picture of subjectivity offered in poststructuralist film theory.

Star Studies

An important component of reception is our response to stars — performers who become recognizable through their films or who bring celebrity to their roles. In addition to analyzing how a star's image is composed, theorists are interested in how audience reception helps define a star's cultural meaning. Although they are one of the most pervasive aspects of cinema, stars may seem like unlikely topics to be considered in a theoretical approach. After all, stars are the province of entertainment news, tabloid journalism, fan websites, and online chats. But these familiar and ephemeral sources have an important place in cultural studies. Viewers understand a film in relationship to what they know of its stars

outside the world of the film's fiction. From Judy Garland to Lindsay Lohan, stars' troubled offscreen lives inform reception of their wholesome onscreen roles. Joaquin Phoenix's idiosyncrasies as a public figure — he is notoriously cryptic and publicity-shy — echo in a series of intense characters he has portrayed, including Johnny Cash in *Walk the Line* (2005), a traumatized veteran in *You Were Never Really Here* (2017) **[Figure 11.20]**, and an Oscar-winning performance in *Joker* (2019).

11.20 ***You Were Never Really Here*** (2017). Joaquin Phoenix's star image is constructed by marketing, publicity, and a series of volatile film roles that play off his offscreen persona.

Richard Dyer details how multiple discourses about stars — including promotion (studio-arranged exposure such as websites and television appearances), publicity (romances, scandals, and political involvement), commentary (critical evaluations and awards), and their appearances in films — help construct their images. Star images become texts that can be read in their own

right. Even when a particular star is billed as an "ordinary guy," like Tom Hanks, or "the girl next door," like Doris Day was in the 1950s, this image is carefully orchestrated. In the social media era, stars themselves contribute to the discourses that audiences encounter in understanding a star's image.

Analysis of a star image enriches understanding of a particular film as well as film culture. Viola Davis became a star later in her career, appearing in mass-market fantasy/action movies like *Suicide Squad* (2016) and *Ender's Game* (2013); receiving Academy Award nominations for her work in prestigious films like *Doubt* (2008) and *The Help* (2011) and an Oscar for *Fences* (2016); and crossing media by starring in the television series *How to Get Away with Murder* (2014–2020). She tends to play serious, formidable characters and has complemented her work with a series of awards-show speeches that acknowledge her own struggles and those of women of color in Hollywood. Her performances and public appearances combine to create a persona that carries connotations of authenticity and moral authority **[Figure 11.21]**.

Kevin Winter/Getty Images Entertainment/Getty Images

11.21 Viola Davis. The actress quoted Sojourner Truth in her 2015 Emmy Award acceptance speech for outstanding lead actress in a drama series, the first to be won by a woman of color. The unethical character she plays on the television show *How to Get Away with Murder* (2014–2017) adds complexity to her star image. She also won an Oscar for a very different role in the film version of *Fences* (2016).

Audiences will never have access to the star as a real person. Instead, we experience his or her constructed image in relation to

cultural codes (including age, race, class, gender, religion, fashion, and more) and according to filmic codes (genre, acting, and even lighting). For example, the silent film star Lillian Gish was sometimes lit from above as she stood on a white sheet. The reflected light enhanced her pallor and the radiance of her blond hair, connoting a virginal whiteness that was an important component of her star image in films directed by the white supremacist D. W. Griffith. Stars are often considered the embodiment of types. For example, John Wayne connotes rugged individualism; Sandra Bullock, spunky decency; Morgan Freeman, quiet dignity; Will Ferrell, naive mayhem. Heath Ledger's star image gained new dimensions from his performance as the Joker in *The Dark Knight* (2008) and his tragic premature death before that film's release.

We also construct our own identities and communities through stars whom we will never know, and this is not necessarily a negative aspect of the phenomenon. Young girls who patterned themselves after plucky singing star Deanna Durbin in the 1940s, Madonna in the 1980s, or Idina Menzel's characters in the 2000s incorporated the quality of independence these stars embodied and identified themselves in solidarity, rather than in competition, with other girls who shared their appreciation. According to Dyer, a basic tension between the ordinary and the extraordinary is at the root of the star phenomenon. Stars are not better people than the rest of us, which

facilitates our identification with them. And yet they remain a breed apart.

Star discourse is a particularly revealing and useful critical approach to cinema because it is based in our everyday experience as fans. We have many immediate and unexamined responses to stars, from crushes to antipathies. But we also appreciate stars in nuanced ways that yield considerable critical understanding. Cultural studies of stars often begin with viewer testimonials, not taking them at face value but using them as a starting point for a sociological analysis. What ethnic groups are represented in a nation's most popular stars? Do popular female stars transgress the boundaries of what is considered proper female behavior? Are people of color limited to supporting roles? Stars are powerful forces for understanding what is important to a culture at any given moment.

Race and Representation

The concept of race — taken not as an objective fact but as a socially constructed category based on historical power divisions and valuations of perceived difference — intersects with the film experience on many different levels, including questions of representation and reception. Many different theoretical approaches can illuminate these issues. Cultural studies models address topics such as how stereotypes circulate and how they are received by diverse audiences and how discourses of imperialism,

colonialism, and nationalism are embedded in film stories, genres, and star images. In this area, it is helpful to distinguish two senses of the term representation — (1) the aesthetic sense (for example, how African American characters are depicted visually and narratively in the films of Spike Lee **[Figure 11.22]** versus those in *Gone with the Wind*, 1939) and (2) the political sense of standing for a group of people (for example, as an elected representative to the U.S. Congress does). Both senses are at play in the cinematic representation of race. In addition, theories of exile and migration, cultural hybridity and diaspora, the global and the intercultural have added to the store of explanatory frames we use to look at race and representation in cinema.

11.22 ***Bamboozled*** (2000). Spike Lee's film about a TV show that exploits the history of racist stereotypes explores representation as a political as well as an aesthetic issue.

Identification across race is a fraught and often obligatory process for nonwhite viewers because of the historical lack of racial diversity onscreen. Cinematic history reinforces the assumption of a white, Western spectator-subject. In classical Hollywood films, nonwhite characters are relegated to the periphery of the action as villainous, comic, sometimes noble — but always secondary — characters. Colonialism — the assumed primacy and historical domination of Western values, peoples, and power over people from other parts of the globe — pervades genres such as the western and the adventure film. In the musical *The King and I* (1956), one white Englishwoman proves to be a match for the Siamese king and his entire court **[Figure 11.23]**. In *Unthinking Eurocentrism: Multiculturalism and the Media* (1994), theorists Robert Stam and Ella Shohat show how a Western gaze and voice are reproduced in popular films such as the *Indiana Jones* series (1981–2008), in which non-Western cultures provide colorful backgrounds for the exploits of a Western hero. They also discuss how nondominant cultures are marginalized by casting when white actors play other races **[Figure 11.24]** and even by sound, when everyone speaks English in films set in another country or when jazz scores are used in films in which all the characters are white.

11.23 ***The King and I*** (1956). This film depicts colonialism filtered through a charming musical romance told from a white Englishwoman's perspective.

11.24 ***Gandhi*** (1982). White British actor Ben Kingsley plays the Indian populist leader.

VIEWING CUE

Research the star of the film you are about to watch for class. What does your previous knowledge of this star bring to your viewing? Is the role at odds with his or her established image?

But by looking at discourses like music and mise-en-scène, Stam and Shohat show how American cinema often reflects a multicultural society in other ways besides direct visual representation. The importance of the western as a genre or of the plantation as a setting gives evidence of a cultural preoccupation with racial difference and conflicts at the origin of national identity. Although often stereotyped in such film representations, people of color stand at the center of the nation's definition of itself. Stam and Shohat's approach to discourses of difference in mainstream cinema also allows for critiques of Hollywood films, from dramas like *Crash* (2004) to animated films like *Zootopia* (2016), that embrace America's multiculturalism only on a surface level.

The work of independent filmmakers of color in the United States has paralleled theoretical explorations of alternative aesthetics. The trickster figure of West African tradition, which appears in *To Sleep with Anger* (1990) by Charles Burnett and in *Zajota and the Boogie Spirit* (1989) by Ayoka Chenzira, is an expression of the identification of these African American filmmakers with African and African diasporan traditions and motifs. The Africanist aesthetic is realized on a much grander scale in *Black Panther* (2018), a studio film that reached global audiences.

Cultural studies approaches illuminate the hybrid aesthetics of films by diasporan artists whose work depicts journeys between ancestral and current homes. *Monsoon Wedding* (2001) is a realist family film

that incorporates Bollywood-style song-and-dance, and *The Farewell* (2019) depicts a Chinese American woman's conflicted feelings about her U.S.-based family's choice to keep her Chinese grandmother in the dark about a cancer diagnosis **[Figure 11.25]**. The films shift between languages and complicate definitions of belonging as well as national cinema traditions.

11.25 ***The Farewell*** (2019). This American independent film about an independent Chinese American granddaughter also belongs to the transnational movement of Chinese diaspora cinema.

Questions of national identity are at the heart of explorations of the aesthetics of political liberation in anticolonial and postcolonial cinemas around the world. Third Cinema (discussed in Chapter 2) began as a Latin American movement to address cinema's popular audience with revolutionary ideas. These works often use narrative forms more in keeping with specific cultural traditions or political ideas than with the linear cause-and-effect structures of Hollywood

films. Humberto Solás's *Lucía* (1968), for instance, uses a three-part structure to link the fates of three Cuban women in different historical moments [Figure 11.26].

11.26 ***Lucía*** (1968). Humberto Solás's film uses formal innovation to reflect on Cuban history through the stories of three women.

Critics associated with cultural studies argue that there is room for agency and divergence in our reception experiences and that the kinds of films and related cinematic phenomena that are deemed worthy of theoretical attention should be multiplied. By so doing, they take apart the unity and predictability that characterized earlier

poststructuralist film theory. With roots in sociology, cultural studies often embraces a broader definition of contemporary media than film studies based in the humanities. This wider scope has opened up space for addressing the distinctiveness of television and internet media as well as the many social and economic transactions that surround cinema today — from the viewing of works on multiple platforms to the incorporation of movie franchises into our daily lives.

FILM IN FOCUS *Clueless* about Contemporary Film Theory? (1995)

See also: *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* (2004); *Scott Pilgrim vs. the World* (2010)

To watch a clip from *Clueless* (1995), go to LaunchPad for *The Film Experience* at **launchpadworks.com**

Theory will be present in all the sites that a culture uses for debate and conversation, including popular films. Although the title of the 1995 film *Clueless* would seem to disclaim any form of knowledge whatsoever, many theoretical issues are raised by the film. *Clueless* helps “clue us in” to the concerns of postmodern cinema, adaptation studies, and genre criticism, and it is of particular interest to feminist and cultural studies critics.

Clueless takes place in Los Angeles, a city whose freeways, location, cultural diversity, entertainment industry, commercial and artistic gems of pastiche architecture, and rampant consumerism have made it exemplary for theorists of postmodernism. The film's main character, played by Alicia Silverstone, is a high school student and thus relatively marginal in terms of social power **[Figure 11.27]**. But as a rich, blonde, white girl, she wields the power of consumerism within a bubble of privilege. A "remake" or update of Jane Austen's novel *Emma*, the film could be considered to be a nostalgic but inauthentic citation of the culture of another era. The main character's name, Cher, is another citation, this time of the "inauthentic" culture of the recent past (pop star Cher is known for her costumes and physical transformations).

11.27 *Clueless* (1995). Postmodern style and attitude characterize a film that found a welcome reception among young audiences, especially young women.

The multiculturalism of postmodern Los Angeles is signaled by Cher's group of school friends. Yet this is a tongue-in-cheek depiction because Cher's African American best friend, Dionne, is as fabulously wealthy as she is. The girls are worlds apart in socioeconomic terms from Cher's Latina housekeeper, for example.

The film opens with a montage of fresh-faced teenagers, and with postmodern irony Cher's voiceover compares what we have just seen to an acne-product commercial, addressing us directly with postmodern reflexivity. The definition of identity as a matter of surface appearance is underscored in the next set of images: Cher "tries on" different outfits using a computer program containing simulations of the ample contents of her closet. Although Cher undergoes a transformation in character during the course of the film, she nevertheless continues to understand social problems in commodity-culture terms: she donates her skis to the homeless. And it is while window shopping that Cher finally realizes what it is she truly wants. As she wanders around gazing at merchandise, bits of the film's action replay in her mind. This thorough confusion of "real" and cinematic perception illustrates the postmodern "mobilized virtual gaze" that Anne Friedberg connects to women's history of consumerism **[Figure 11.28]**.

11.28 ***Clueless*** (1995). Cher's subjective flashbacks and window shopping blur in what Anne Friedberg calls postmodernism's "mobilized virtual gaze."

The description thus far might make the film seem as if it is concerned only with the trivial. But feminist theorists point out that women's consignment to the domestic sphere with its "trivial" concerns of shopping, caregiving, and romance

has a direct effect on the public sphere, which was as true in Jane Austen's day as it is in our own. Cher's ostensibly minor concerns have important consequences in her world, and by portraying her subjectivity through her voiceover and her optical point of view, the film gives her perspective validity. *Clueless* was directed by a woman, Amy Heckerling, who has specialized in youth genre films that pay special attention to young women's perspectives. Austen, too, was consigned to a circumscribed genre within which she made enduring works of art.

Viewers might find *Clueless*'s romantic ending predictable, even disappointing, in that it undermines what was the film's most important relationship — the one between Cher and Dionne and the other girls — by conflating plot closure with heterosexual coupling. But in fact, the film winks at the happily-ever-after convention, ending with a wedding—which the viewer for a moment believes might be Cher's. "As if!" her voiceover interjects, and it is revealed that two schoolteachers she helped fix up are getting married. Thus her character escapes the strictures of the marriage plot with postmodern irony.

One of the most remarkable aspects of *Clueless* is its reception. At the time of its release, it successfully addressed a teenage interpretive community, both in and outside the United States, which quickly adopted the film's styles in fashion and slang, using its signifiers to produce new meanings. *Clueless* validated and enabled (coded) communication among girls, who, far from being treated yet again as know-nothings, were now the only ones fully "clued in." Multiple viewings made for an open-ended text that over the years has invited new viewers and reissues, confusing origins and effects. *Clueless* sums up the complexity of postmodern simulation in a succinct "As if!"

Film and Philosophy

Even as cultural studies critics reject the overt formalism and abstractions of 1970s film theory, film philosophers critique cultural studies for its lack of a unifying approach with clearly defined questions and terms. To some extent, all film theory is related to philosophy and characterized by a search for underlying principles and a logical argument. However, some film theorists identify more strongly than others with philosophical questions and methods. **Analytic philosophy**, an approach that emphasizes the logical clarification of argument, approaches concepts differently than poststructuralist theories interested in the instability of signs and meaning. For example, in *Mystifying Movies: Fads and Fallacies in Contemporary Film Theory* (1991), Noël Carroll carefully and gleefully debunks the analogy of film to dreams.

David Bordwell, one of the most prolific and well-respected contemporary film scholars, advocates a cognitivist approach that understands our response to film in terms of rational evaluation of visual and narrative cues that characterize film styles prevalent in particular places at particular historical junctures. **Cognitivism** draws on psychology and neuroscience to understand how the mind responds to narrative and aesthetic information in film. Rejecting analysis that invokes unconscious fantasy or employs idiosyncratic interpretation, cognitivism claims that we respond to the moving image with the same perceptual processes we use to respond to visual stimuli in the world — by adjusting film images for lack of depth and perceiving the identity of objects that are moving and

changing in time. Not simply a backlash against the obscure terminology and French-influenced syntax of poststructuralist theory, analytic philosophy and cognitivist film theory argue for a less metaphorical, more scientific, and more historically verifiable definition and practice of film studies.

Another influential philosophical approach in film theory is **phenomenology** — which postulates that any act of perception involves a mutuality of the viewer and what is viewed. Jacques Lacan and Christian Metz derived their emphasis on the gaze from phenomenologists, but their emphasis on the psychoanalytic concept of the unconscious diverged from the more embodied consciousness that phenomenology described. Vivian Sobchack uses the phenomenology of perception to account for the film experience as a reciprocal relationship between viewer and screen, also distinguishing between the different phenomenologies of film and television viewing, which require different kinds of attention and presence. The emphasis on the viewer's embodiment opens up approaches to the role of **affect** — feelings, attitudes, and sensations — in the encounter with media. Affect is more fleeting and variable than identification and cognition, making it a useful approach for **disability studies**, which rejects normative models of embodiment that presuppose operations of reflection or optimization.

French philosopher Gilles Deleuze has influenced work on affect in film and has made a distinctive contribution to contemporary film theory in two books dedicated to elaborating cinema as field of signs

that can offer a direct image of time. Rejecting the linguistic foundation of Ferdinand de Saussure's thought, Deleuze builds on the semiotics of C. S. Peirce and the work of philosopher Henri Bergson on the importance of time as duration. More than the writings of almost any other film theorist, Deleuze's work must be studied on its own terms because of the way he develops concepts across specific terminology. In his two books on cinema, Deleuze distinguishes between two types of cinema that correspond roughly to two historical periods.

In Deleuze's terminology, the **movement image** — prevalent in the cinema of the first half of the twentieth century — offers an indirect image of time through conventional ways of representing movement, such as editing that creates causal links between shots. The physical comedy of Buster Keaton and the collision at the heart of Sergei Eisenstein's montage move the viewer though a sequence of images. In contrast, the **time image** — an open-ended image or film that lacks clear signals of spatial connection or logical sequence — is displayed in postwar films. The neorealist works of Roberto Rossellini and the more metaphorical studies of Michelangelo Antonioni, both made in the context of the disillusionment and uncertainty of postwar Italy, do not orient the viewer to a particular expectation or response from shot to shot. Instead of imposing an interpretation on time by representing it through sequence or movement, such films offer a "direct image of time" as the intersection of the potentiality of both past and future **[Figure 11.29]**.

11.29 ***L'Avventura*** (1960). According to philosopher Gilles Deleuze, this classic art film presents "a direct image of time," in part through its unpredictable editing patterns.

Deleuze's philosophy of film goes beyond the specific films and directors he uses as examples to suggest new ways of imagining the relationship between images and thought. Referentiality — the idea that filmic images refer to actual objects, events, or phenomena — is no longer a basic tenet of film theory. For Deleuze, the film image is not a representation of the world; it is an experience of movement or time itself. For other thinkers, referentiality is no longer a tenet of film theory because neither film nor the world is what it used to be.

Postmodernism

Film is not the only medium that organizes our audiovisual experience. Since the photographic basis of film has been largely

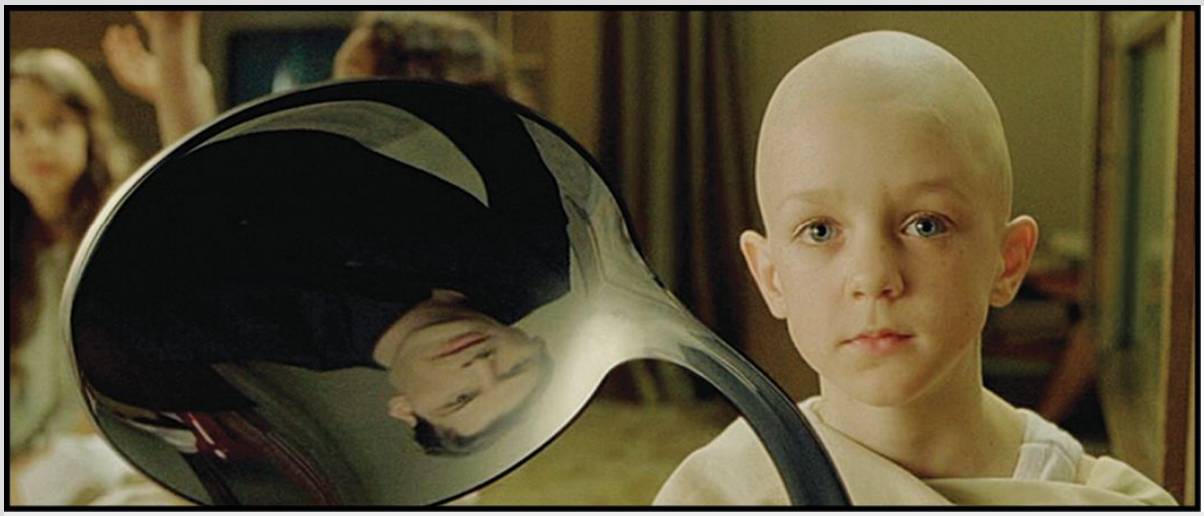
replaced by digital capture and generation, film today is harder to distinguish from other modes of communication. At least since the late 1940s, when television was rapidly adopted into U.S. homes, other moving-image media have challenged cinema's dominance. However, film has so thoroughly transformed our overall experience that it has prepared us for the integration of successive forms, including digital imaging, in our lives. Rather than defining film more narrowly in the digital era, we can think of it more broadly.

This predominance of media is characteristic of the culture of **postmodernism**. As we have mentioned, the term *modernism* refers both to a group of artistic movements (including atonal music, cubist painting, and montage filmmaking) and to the period in which those movements emerged and to which they responded (generally, the first half of the twentieth century). Postmodernism also has two primary definitions:

- In architecture, art, music, and film, postmodernism incorporates many other styles through fragments or references in a practice known as *pastiche*.
- Historically postmodernism is the cultural period in which political, cultural, and economic shifts challenged the tenets of modernism, including its belief in the possibility of critiquing the world through art, the division of high and low culture, and the genius and independent identity of the artist.

The most important thinkers on postmodernism have addressed both aspects of this definition. Fredric Jameson defines postmodernism historically as "the cultural logic of late capitalism" — referring to the period in post–World War II economic history when advertising and consumerism, multinational conglomerates, and globalization of financing and services took over from industrial production and circulation of goods. Stylistically, postmodern cinema represents history as nostalgia, as if the past were nothing more than a movie style.

For Jean Baudrillard, the triumph of the image in our cultural age is so complete that we live in a **simulacrum**, a copy without an original, of which Disneyland is one of his most illuminating examples. In *The Matrix* and its sequels (1999–2003), the characters' belief that they live in the "real world" is mistaken: the city, food, intimate relationships, and physical struggles are all computer-generated **[Figure 11.30]**. This lack of referentiality is frightening in that it represents the absence of any overarching certainty to ground postmodern fragmentation. But on the hopeful side, the "real" is now open to change. When *The Matrix* shows a (fake) book written by Jean Baudrillard, the film is both making an in-joke and illustrating postmodernism's tenet that there is nothing new in the world.



11.30 ***The Matrix*** (1999). “What is the matrix?” the film’s ad campaign asked. Postmodern theorist Jean Baudrillard is quoted in the film.

It is no accident that the postmodern world is vividly presented in a movie because movies themselves are simulations. Film theorist Anne Friedberg notes that the way we consume film images can be generalized to a society characterized by image consumption and mobility. The variety of “looks” one finds by window shopping, internet surfing, or identifying with other characters at the movies has a positive side. The postmodern breakdown of singular identity has as its corollary a recognition of identities formerly relegated to the margins. Postmodernism also recognizes the changes wrought by globalization. New technologies make the flow of images even easier — not only from Hollywood to the rest of the world but also from formerly peripheral sources to U.S. audiences and between local cultures. The acceleration of media convergence in the digital era allows access to these flows through different technological

means and according to different habits of organizing time and experiencing both space and interface.

Our survey of the history of contemporary film theory evokes the auspicious institutional climate of the academic discipline of film studies in Anglo-American universities, which has consolidated and developed ideas from France and elsewhere since the late 1960s. As we have noted, cultural studies and cognitivism have challenged the orthodoxies that began to emerge in film theory, and their pluralism and skepticism add a welcome perspective on ideas that might otherwise become rote and ossified and simply "applied" to new cases. But bodies of theoretical writing of cinema from places outside this tradition, such as Japan, are less well known, and efforts to globalize the discipline are underway. Moreover, fields of knowledge advance by active questioning and dissent. In the twenty-first century, digital culture has not only challenged the definition of film but has also opened new directions in film theory.

Film Theory and Digital Culture

The challenges posed by the digital image to film since the 1990s go beyond technological and economic ones: they are also intellectual. Cinematic specificity is no longer defined by the photographic image, and the interdisciplinarity of cinema studies has accordingly expanded to include computer science, engineering, and design. Although in some ways new technology can be seen as merely

enhancing the film experience as we have known it (for example, the return of 3-D technologies in the 2000s), in other ways technology alters both the medium and our experience of it (for example, the puzzles, interactivity, and spatial innovations of video games). Scholars continue to draw on the legacies of previous inquiries in film theory in order to identify the salient questions our contemporary audiovisual experience raises and to develop tools with which to address those questions.

Digital culture has also provided much greater access to writing about moving images, as well as to a host of films and film traditions that inspire viewers to contribute their own writing. Reading about film takes place in a broader public context, recalling the film journals of the avant-garde film movements of the 1920s, the post–World War II climate of cinephilia found in *Cahiers du Cinéma*, or the cultural influence of Latin American film critics outside the university. The internet has created communities around appreciation for contemporary film movements such as **slow cinema**, a type of art cinema made and circulating around the world that uses long takes and wide framing to allow viewers meaningful observation of other spaces, in contrast with dematerialized and accelerated media experiences **[Figure 11.31]**.

11.31 ***Vitalina Varela*** (2019). The minimalist films of Portuguese director Pedro Costa imprint the lives of Cape Verdean residents of Lisbon, like this film's eponymous character, on viewers' perception. Online commentators share strategies for engaging with and valuing "slow cinema."

Film theorist Girish Shambu argues that the proliferation of online film blogs and podcasts that dive deeply into film craft and culture, as well as the success of specialty film companies like Criterion, foster a "new cinephilia." Online journals like *Senses of Cinema* provide readers with access to auteurist film criticism, philosophical essays on film, and participatory film culture. The emergence of video essays as a form of critical commentary drawing on digital editing and internet circulation is a key marker of a new democratization of film theory. For example, the Nerdwriter offers regular video essays on YouTube, while the scholarly online journal *[in]Transition* pairs videographic criticism with verbal commentary

by both the creators of video essays and scholars who serve as peer reviewers. While not all of this discourse is as sustained and focused as film theory, it brings the historical contribution of theorists into circulation alongside the many facets of film culture that initially sparked their thinking. In this context, reading and viewing, writing and making, are inextricably linked. One important clearinghouse encapsulates the potential: Film Studies for Free. In this open-source website, film scholar Catherine Grant consolidates resources such as podcasts, video essays, links to online writing and blog posts to bring scholarship outside the walls of the academy.

This chapter has aimed to demystify the field of film theory. In reading and picking apart theorists' work, it is important to recall that on some level theory always relates to practice. Thus, in reviewing Stuart Hall's approach to reception theory or Fredric Jameson's definition of postmodernism, we look at concrete responses to intellectual challenges. The term *theory* is a useful, shorthand way to refer to a body of knowledge and a set of questions. We study this corpus to gain historical perspective, to acquire tools for decoding our experiences of particular films, and above all to comprehend the hold that movies have on our imaginations and our social lives.

Chapter 11 Review

SUMMARY

- Today, **film theory** is a sustained inquiry into the nature and scope of film and film culture conducted mainly in the academy. But earlier film theorists came from many contexts.
    - Early writings examined cinema's relationship to language, to the changes of modern culture, and to other art forms.
    - One of the organizing debates of classical film theory centers around the cinema's appeal to **realism** versus its formal characteristics.
        - For theorists like André Bazin and Siegfried Kracauer, film's ability to refer to the world through images that resemble and are captured from real objects sets it apart as a realist medium.
        - Other theorists, including Béla Balázs and Rudolf Arnheim, championed formalist theories and were interested in how film became an art form by transcending its referential qualities.
        - Walter Benjamin emphasized cinema's integral role in the experience of modernity, including mechanization, changes in time and space due to communication and transportation technologies, and urbanization.

- After World War II, film journals like *Cahiers du cinéma* proliferated, and a vibrant film culture formed around them.
    - **Auteur theory**, which emerged in the 1950s, asserts that a film bears the creative imprint of one individual, usually the director, and allows for the study of a group of films.
    - **Genre criticism** is another influential way to group films for study, which can also inform auteur theory by associating a director with a particular genre.
- The academic discipline of film studies, formulated as **contemporary film theory**, has been heavily influenced by currents of thought converging in postwar France, including semiotics, structuralism, and Marxism.
    - **Semiotics** is the study of **signs**, which include words, pictures, gestures, and a wide range of other coded messages.
        - **Narratology** is the study of narrative forms and a branch of **structuralism**, which looks for common structures across examples of a phenomenon rather than looking for a shared essence.
        - Marxist thinkers looked at **ideology** — a systematic set of beliefs that is not necessarily conscious — in order to explain how people come to accept ideas and conditions contrary to their interests.
    - **Poststructuralism** questions structuralists' fixed definitions, assumption of objectivity, and disregard for cultural and historical context.

    - Psychoanalytic theory can be used to describe the psychic processes through which we interact with film.
    - According to **apparatus theory**, ideological assumptions are reproduced through the impression of reality conveyed by film technology and the viewing situation.
    - The study of how subjects interact with films is known as **spectatorship**.
- Theories of gender and sexuality are integral to the study of narrative and spectatorship in film.
    - Feminist film theory gained prominence in the 1970s, especially with Laura Mulvey's definition of "woman as image/man as bearer of the look."
    - LGBT film theorists look at the centrality of heterosexuality to narrative and at assumption about how gender determines identification and desire in film viewing.
- **Cultural studies** scrutinizes aspects of cinema embedded in the everyday lives of individuals or groups in particular social contexts or at certain historical junctures.
    - **Reception theory** focuses on how a film is received by audiences and often examines audience response to stars.
    - Cultural studies addresses issues of race and representation as well as how concepts of imperialism, colonialism, and nationalism are embedded in film.
- Philosophy also addresses the nature of film and the film experience.

    - **Cognitivism** draws on psychology to understand how the mind responds to film.
    - **Phenomenology** postulates that any act of perception involves a mutuality of the viewer and what is viewed.
    - Philosopher Gilles Deleuze offers a distinctive theory of film, positing that the **movement image** prevalent in cinema in the first half of the twentieth century depends on cause and effect. By contrast, many post–World War II films display the **time image**, an open-ended image that lacks spatial connection or logical sequence.
- **Postmodernism** has two primary definitions: (1) an artistic style that incorporates fragments of or references to other styles and (2) the period in which political, cultural, and economic shifts have engendered challenges to modernism.

    - Globalization and new technology have made *media convergence* a distinct feature of postmodern culture.

KEY TERMS

film theory
verisimilitude
ontology
medium specificity
classical film theory
French impressionist cinema
photogénie
formalism

realism
mimesis
auteur theory
metteur-en-scène
cinephilia
genre criticism
structuralism
semiotics
sign
signifier
signified
referent
code
message
denotation
connotation
symbol
icon
index
narratology
ideology
poststructuralism
apparatus theory
spectatorship
cultural studies
reception theory
interpretive community
oppositional gaze

analytic philosophy
cognitivism
phenomenology
affect
disability studies
movement image
time image
postmodernism
simulacrum
slow cinema

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CHAPTER 12 WRITING A FILM ESSAY
Observations, Arguments, Research, and Analysis

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In Spike Jonze's 2002 *Adaptation*, Charlie Kaufman (Nicolas Cage) is a writer in crisis. Faced with the challenge of adapting Susan Orlean's

nonfiction book *The Orchid Thief* for the screen, he finds himself paralyzed by extreme writer's block. While his twin brother Donald blithely forges ahead with his own screenplay, Charlie can only stare in dismay at a blank page, unable to begin to write. After a series of hilarious, strange, and tragic encounters in Hollywood, New York, and the Florida Everglades, Charlie discovers that "change is not a choice" and that a writer must first and foremost follow his passion by writing about what he loves. Writing is often complex and difficult, with many stages and strategies, but Charlie's lesson for writers of films may also be good advice for writers about film: find a passion to propel your writing.

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Writers can be found everywhere in films and film history. Famous and not-so-famous writers populate and drive many kinds of stories about many kinds of experiences. *Mishima* (1985) describes the intense blend of radically conservative politics and restless creativity in the life of Japanese author Yukio Mishima. In *Central Station* (1998), a middle-aged woman, Dora, sets up a stand in the middle of a crowded railroad station where illiterate people pay her to write letters to their friends and loved ones. And Jim Jarmusch's *Paterson* (2016) wryly and rhythmically weaves the daily life and family romance of a bus driver (who happens to be named Paterson) in Paterson, New Jersey, with his patient efforts to write poetry modeled after William Carlos Williams, the famous American

poet/physician who lived in Rutherford, New Jersey, and wrote an epic poem titled *Paterson* [Figure 12.1]. As with other arts and cultural activities, movies describe and inspire a common and fundamental human need to explain one's feelings about and responses to a significant experience. In this chapter, we see how writing about film develops from these needs and inspirations, and we show how it can become a rich extension of our fundamental film experiences.

12.1 ***Paterson*** (2016). The power of writing can define your world.

Writing about film has been a significant part of film culture since the beginning of movies. Almost simultaneously with the arrival of the cinema, writers debated the function and value of this new art form. In the first few decades of film history, film critics such as

Vachel Lindsay in his 1915 book *The Art of the Moving Picture* and Dorothy Richardson in the 1920s art magazine *Close Up* wrote passionately about movies. Since then, movie reviews, scholarly essays, and philosophical books — by writers including James Agee, Umberto Eco, Pauline Kael, and Trinh T. Minh-ha — have debated the achievements of individual films and the cultural importance of movies in general.

KEY OBJECTIVES

- Describe the differences between reviews and critical essays.
- Practice taking notes on films and organizing those notes.
- Choose a topic, and develop it into a thesis and argument for a paper.
- Conduct research and integrate sources.
- Acquire the skills to turn your work into a polished essay.
- Learn to refer to images and clips in your essay and potentially produce an essay in video form.

Writing an Analytical Film Essay

Writing extends the complex relationship we have with films by challenging us to articulate our feelings and ideas and to communicate our responses convincingly. In 1915, early reviewers and critics often focused on the dangerous or uplifting effects that movies might have on women or children. In the 1960s, film was frequently discussed in terms of its political impact or social meaning. Today's writers focus on a range of topics — including characters, stars, stories, new film technologies, and historical questions, such as how 1930s censorship influenced film content or how 1950s teenage audiences encouraged the making of certain kinds of films.

Personal Opinion and Objectivity

Writing about a film usually involves a play between subject matter and meaning. The subject matter of a film is the material that directly or indirectly comprises the film, whereas the meaning is the interpretation a writer discovers within that material. In Alejandro González Iñárritu's *Birdman* (2014), for instance, the subject matter describes the crisis of an aging former superhero, Riggan Thomson, who attempts to redeem his career as a serious Broadway actor. As he struggles to produce his theatrical version of a Raymond Carver short story, he must confront a surreal, superhero alter ego

(Birdman), a testy stage actor in the play, a nasty theater critic, and an estranged and troubled daughter (Sam). The film's meaning, however, is more complicated than a description of the characters and plot. It depends on the film's luxurious style and intricate organization — as multiple framings and camera movements shift between the streets of New York, a theater stage, and fantastic hallucinations and as viewers experience and respond to the film. Other films have used similar subject matter about staging a play on film, but for some writers, *Birdman*'s tale of loss and hope weaves subtle and often complex points about passion, fantasy, and redemption **[Figure 12.2]**. For other writers, the film becomes a difficult and confused tale that never clearly answers the many questions it raises.

12.2 ***Birdman*** (2014). Discovering complex meanings behind a film's subject matter requires viewers to interpret the style and narrative form of the film.

Useful and insightful writing always balances personal opinion with **critical objectivity** — writing with a detached response that offers judgments based on facts and evidence with which others would, or could, agree. An essay that hides behind too many opinions (by constantly stating "I feel" or "In my opinion") seems unreliable and too personal to have any value for others. Writing about *Birdman*, for example, a writer may attempt to hide behind a lack of certainty about the ending of the film and its meaning: "In my opinion, Riggan's relation to his Birdman character is, to the end, ambiguous. It is never clear, for me, why he is haunted and doomed by his lost persona, and the last scene seems to suggest a suicide in despair" **[Figure 12.3]**. Conversely, flat descriptive statements fail to interest readers in an essay's argument and often miss the subtleties of a film: "The meanings of Riggan's final actions are unclear and confusing." Balancing opinion and critical objectivity, as in the following student passage, results in writing that engages and convinces the reader that your insights could be useful revelations for most viewers of the film:

12.3 *Birdman* (2014). Is the interpretation of the film's final moments a matter of opinion or part of the film's complex vision?

In *Birdman*, the concluding disappearance of Riggans is unexpected, dramatic, and powerful, a combination that disturbs and confuses me, as it probably does most viewers. This confusion about his actions and motives is, however, part of the strange and mysterious beauty of the film because it asks us to recognize a central theme. As his daughter, Sam, searches through the open window frame, first below her and then in the skies above, her slight smile confirms the possibility that our fantasies and passions can lift us above the dark gravity of the world below us.

Identifying Your Readers

VIEWING CUE

Watch the clip of *Birdman* (2014) online. What subjective claims might a writer make about this section of the film? What objective claims might a writer make?

Description
The scene shows Riggan Thomson walking down a street while a man dressed as a bird walks behind him.

Knowing or anticipating your readers can guide a writer in balancing opinion and objectivity. If we think of writing about film as an extension of conversations or arguments we have with friends about a film, we realize that the terms and tone of these discussions change with different people. A conversation between two knowledgeable fans of World War II films would likely presume that they have both seen many of the same films and know a great deal about special effects. Their discussion might thus get quickly to the

finer points about how the famous battle between the Japanese and the Americans was portrayed in *Letters from Iwo Jima* (2006) **[Figure 12.4]**. In talking about *The Killing of the Sacred Deer* (2017) with a fan of Greek director Yorgos Lanthmos, a student of classical literature might discuss the mythic tale of Iphigenia and Agamemnon, the mythic backdrop for this surreal modern tragedy.

12.4 *Letters from Iwo Jima* (2006). Director Clint Eastwood portrays one of World War II's fiercest battles from the perspective of the Japanese.

Understanding your readers is like knowing the person you are talking with: it helps determine the amount of basic information you need to provide, the level of complexity of the discussion, and the kind of language you should use. The following four questions are useful guidelines for gearing your essay to certain readers:

- How familiar are your readers with the film being discussed?
- What is your readers' level of interest in the film?

- What do your readers know about the film's historical and cultural contexts?
- How familiar are your readers with the terminology of film criticism and theory?

For most critical essays, anticipating your readers' familiarity with and interest in the film means assuming they have seen the film at least once and thus do not require an extensive plot summary. Such readers are not concerned primarily with whether a movie is good or bad or with other general observations. Rather, they want to be enlightened about a specific dimension of the film (such as the opening shot) or about a complicated or puzzling issue in the film. For instance, the blocking of different characters/actors in different scenes in *Spotlight* (2015) creates different kinds of tension and carries specific meanings in the film — which some viewers may have noticed but few would have thought about **[Figures 12.5a and 12.5b]**. An effective writer works to convince readers that their interests can be deepened and enriched by following the writer's argument about a film.

(a)

(b)

12.5a and 12.5b *Spotlight* (2015). Spotting a consistent pattern of blocking, such as the arrangement of individuals in doorways or their dramatic separation by furniture, can potentially suggest a dramatic tension that leads to an eye-opening argument.

Description
Still (a) shows a small group of four men and a woman seated around an office desk. Still (b) shows a woman and three men engaged in discussion in an office. One of the men sits on the table. In both scenes, the desks are crowded with piles of papers and files and each person sits hunched forward.

Knowledge of "the film's historical and cultural contexts" refers to how much your readers know about the place and time of the film's appearance. If the film was made in the United States in the 1920s, would information about that period help your readers better understand the film?

Finally, determining your readers' level of familiarity with the terminology of film criticism and theory allows you to choose language that can efficiently and clearly communicate your argument. Can you assume that a term like *continuity editing* will be easily understood, or do you need to define it? In making these decisions, keep in mind that both overly simplistic language and dense jargon can equally undermine your analysis.

In most college-level film courses, your audience will be not only your professor but also your peers — intelligent individuals who have seen the film, share information and knowledge about film criticism, but are not necessarily experts. For this audience, you can concentrate on a particular theme or sequence that may have been overlooked by a critical viewer. Note that your writing style and

choice of words should be more rigorous and academic than in the typical movie review.

Elements of the Analytical Film Essay

Two common forms of film writing are film reviews and analytical essays. Aimed at a general audience that has not seen the film, a **film review** tends to be a short essay that describes the plot of a movie, provides useful background information (about the actors and the director, for example), and pronounces a clear evaluation of the film to guide its readers. In contrast, the **analytical essay**, distinguished by its intended audience and the level of its critical language, is the most common kind of writing done by film students and scholars. It typically focuses on a particular feature or theme of a film, provides an interpretation of that material, and then gives a careful analysis to prove or demonstrate that interpretation. Unlike the writer of a movie review for a magazine, the writer of an analytical essay presumes that readers know the film and do not require an extensive plot summary or background information. Although a clear and engaging style is the goal of any kind of writing about film, the writer of an analytical essay often chooses words and terms that can effectively communicate complex ideas.

VIEWING CUE

As you prepare to write an analytical essay about a film you have seen in class, consider your readers. What defines them? What are their interests? What do they need or want to know about the film?

Consider this passage from a hypothetical essay about *O Brother, Where Art Thou*? (2000), written for a college film course **[Figure 12.6]**. Whereas a newspaper review might summarize the plot, offer some background information, and employ more casual language, note how this analytical essay concentrates on a specific and perhaps less obvious argument:

12.6 *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* (2000). Three escaped convicts are the focus for a precise analysis.

Joel and Ethan Coen's *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* (2000) is much more than a musical comedy loosely structured around *The Odyssey*. A sharp ideological critique of race and class in modern America is woven throughout the distinctive soundtrack, the plot set in Depression-era America, and the comic exaggerations of its characters. Regularly mistaken to be African Americans, the three escaped

convicts (Everett, Pete, and Delmar) learn quickly that their lower-class white status binds them to the fate of the black men and women they encounter, and from this predicament, the film explores the economic and political power structures that then and now make poverty color-blind. Two sequences that dramatize this provocative dimension of the film are the arrival of the prisoners at a church to see a movie — which is a reference to Preston Sturges's film *Sullivan's Travels* (1941), in which the Coens found the title for their movie — and the Ku Klux Klan rally where the fugitives rescue their black comrade, Tommy.

Here the essay's focus is relatively refined and sophisticated. It assumes its readers have seen and know the film, and it concentrates not on general information but on a specific thesis about race and class **[Figure 12.7]**. Along with its choice of a polemical thesis, this critical essay employs terms (such as "ideological critique") that are suited to academic writing.

12.7 ***O Brother, Where Art Thou?*** (2000). An analytical paper on race and class in this comic film can be shaped around two specific sequences — the first about the arrival of the prisoners in a black church and the second about their witnessing of a Ku Klux Klan rally.

Preparing to Write about a Film

Despite sharing some common ground with them, an effective film essay differs from casual conversations and debates about a movie. Few writers can dash off a perceptive commentary on a film with little preparation or revision. Instead, most writers gain considerably from anticipating what they will write about and later reviewing carefully what they have written. Few could watch *The Sorrow and the Pity* (1972), a powerful documentary about fascism in France during World War II, and then immediately type a brilliant paper on Marcel Ophüls's use of documentary strategies to expose certain myths about French history or the French Resistance. Like all good writers, you must follow certain steps in preparing to write an essay: ask questions, take notes, and select a topic.

Asking Questions

First, try to identify your own interests *before* you view the film. Ask yourself:

- How does the film relate to my own background and experiences?
- What have I heard about the film?
- Am I drawn to technology or to questions about gender? To a particular filmmaker or period in movie history? To a certain

national cinema?
- In what direction of inquiry does my interest point?

In Howard Hawks's 1938 *Bringing Up Baby*, Katharine Hepburn plays an audacious heiress (Susan) whose pet leopard (Baby) becomes the foil in her zany relationship with a bumbling paleontologist (David), played by Cary Grant [Figure 12.8]. Perhaps you have seen other films by Hawks, like *His Girl Friday* (1940), or other films with Hepburn, like *The Philadelphia Story* (1940). Might you consider comparing the two Hawks films or Hepburn's two different roles?

12.8 ***Bringing Up Baby*** (1938). Katharine Hepburn's role as an audacious heiress involved with a blundering paleontologist could start a writer's critical thinking about the film.

This sort of preparation is not meant to preclude your being drawn to new ideas and in unexpected directions when you view the film. Surprising discoveries are certainly one of the bonuses of approaching films with an open mind. While watching *In the Bedroom* (2001), one viewer might become puzzled by how the film seems suddenly to change direction. After depicting the excruciating pain of two parents who have lost a son, the movie then becomes a revenge tale in which the father seeks out and murders his son's killer. For the viewer, what seems at first a slow meditation on inexpressible grief becomes a tense thriller. How do the two parts work together? Does loss always require retribution? Does violence always beget violence? By asking these kinds of questions, you can intellectually interact with a film, sharpening your responses and shaping the direction of your essay.

Taking Notes

Note taking, an essential part of writing about film, stimulates critical thinking and generates precise and productive observations. Whereas most students find it natural to take notes on a biology experiment or on their reading of a Shakespeare play, annotating a film is both awkward and unnatural. It is difficult to write while watching a movie in a darkened room, and most films ask that we constantly attend to them so that we do not miss information that passes quickly. Note taking, however, is absolutely necessary to

writing about film because a good analytical essay must include concrete evidence to support its argument — and precise notes provide that support. The three general rules for annotating a film are as follows:

- Take notes on the unusual (events or formal elements that stand out in the film).
- Take notes on events or techniques that recur with regularity.
- Take notes on oppositions that appear in the film.

VIEWING CUE

Before viewing your next film, jot down three or four questions you want to direct at the film. During the film, write down three or four more about specific shots or scenes. Later, attempt to answer all of your questions as precisely as possible.

For instance, most viewers of *Bringing Up Baby* would agree that the sequence involving David and Susan at the local jail, with Hepburn pretending to be a hardened gangster's moll, stands out as one of the funniest and most unusual moments in the film. Equally important, however, are those actions or images whose repetitions suggest a recurring theme or pattern, such as David's repeatedly losing his clothes or glasses. Oppositions can be equally illuminating, such as the contrast between the rival women — the goofy Susan and David's staid fiancée, his scientific assistant.

VIEWING CUE

Which events, sounds, or shots in the film you just viewed stand out as unusual? As most important? As examples of a pattern of repetition? Describe clearly and concretely one or two events, sounds, or shots from the film.

Each writer develops his or her own shorthand for taking notes on films. The trick is to jot down information about the story or characters that seems significant while also recording visual, audio, or other formal details. Some common abbreviations for visual compositions include the following:

ct: cut
cu: close-up
ds: diegetic sound
es: establishing shot
ha: high angle
la: low angle
ls: long shot
mcu: medium close-up
mls: medium long shot
nds: nondiegetic sound
ps: pan shot
trs: tracking shot
vo: voiceover

More specific camera movements and directions can often be re-created with arrows and lines that graph the actions or directions. The following drawings suggest the movements of the camera:

low camera angle ↗ high camera angle ↙ tracking shot ∿

Description

The camera movements and directions respectively are as follows: low camera angle, with an arrow that points upward; high camera angle, with an arrow that points downward; tracking shot, with a squiggly arrow.

For example, part of the jailhouse sequence in *Bringing Up Baby* **[Figures 12.9 and 12.10]** might be annotated as follows to indicate cuts, camera movements, or angles:

mcu of constable and Susan through bars
ct mcu David

12.9 ***Bringing Up Baby*** (1938). "Swinging Door Susie" engages the sheriff …

12.10 ***Bringing Up Baby*** (1938) … and baffles her cellmate, David.

Later, these notes would be filled in, perhaps by again reviewing the sequence for more details — for example, pieces of the hilarious monologue of "Swinging Door Susie." Drawings of shots can supplement such details. Critical comments or observations might also be added — for instance, about how the organization of the shot composition and editing provides the contrast between the officious and tongue-tied sheriff and the zany and loquacious Susan.

Selecting a Topic

After taking and reviewing your notes on the film, you need to choose the topic for the paper. Because there are many dimensions of a film to write about — character, story, music, editing — selecting a manageable topic can prove daunting. Even a lengthy essay will suffer if it attempts to address too many issues. Narrowing your topic will allow you to investigate the issues fully and carefully, resulting in better writing. In a five-or six-page essay, a topic such as "fast-talking comedy in *Bringing Up Baby*" would probably need to rely on generalities and large claims, whereas "gender, order, and disorder in the jailhouse" would be a more focused and manageable topic. Although good critical analysis usually considers different features of a film, we can distinguish two sets of topics for writing about film — formal and contextual. Formal topics concentrate on forms and ideas within a film, including character analysis, narrative analysis, and stylistic analysis. Contextual topics, which relate a film to other films or to surrounding issues, include comparative analysis and historical or cultural analysis.

Formal Topics

In general, there are three types of formal topics: a **character analysis** focuses its argument on a single character or on the interactions between two or more characters, a **narrative analysis** concentrates on the story and its construction, and a **stylistic analysis** focuses on form (such as shot composition, editing, and the use of sound).

Although writing a character analysis may appear easier to do than other kinds of analyses, a good essay about a character requires subtlety and eloquence. Rather than write about a central character, like Susan in *Bringing Up Baby* or Mildred Hayes, the tough and determined mother at the center of *Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri* (2017) **[Figure 12.11]**, an essay might concentrate on a minor character, such as Susan's aristocratic aunt or the sheriff deputy Dixon, the troubled target of Mildred's anger.

12.11 ***Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri*** (2017). Character analysis of a primary role, the tormented mother (played by Francis McDormand), risks describing the obvious.

Similarly, a narrative analysis usually should be refined so that the paper addresses, for instance, the relationship between the beginning and the end of a film or the way a voiceover comments on and directs the story. In *The Shawshank Redemption* (1994), the narrative concentrates largely on Andy Dufresne, condemned to prison for murdering his wife and her lover, but the complexity of his

story becomes richer and more nuanced as it is filtered through the voiceover commentary of his prison comrade “Red” Redding. The relationship of the two creates, in effect, a second narrative line that interacts with the prison story.

A paper that deals with a stylistic topic will be more controllable and incisive if, for instance, it isolates a particular group of shots or identifies a single sound motif that recurs in the film. One student may find a topic for a paper by examining the role of the various narrators in Terrence Malick’s *The Thin Red Line* (1998). Another student may choose to look carefully at repeated editing patterns in *Battleship Potemkin* (1925) or at the use of framing in Yasujiro Ozu’s *Tokyo Story* (1953). Any one of these topics will grow more interesting and insightful if you continue to ask questions during the writing process: How is the character David in *Bringing Up Baby* shaped by costuming or shot composition? How do the various narrators in *The Thin Red Line* reflect different attitudes about war?

FILM IN FOCUS Analysis, Audience, and *Minority Report* (2002)

See also: *A.I.* (2001); *Blade Runner* (1982); *Inception* (2010)

To watch a clip from *Minority Report* (2002), go to LaunchPad for *The Film Experience* at **launchpadworks.com**

Minority Report (2002) initially attracted audiences through the reputation of one of the most prolific and acclaimed directors in the world, Steven Spielberg, and one of the most popular stars in the world, Tom Cruise. Some viewers may enjoy the film because it recalls and elaborates on themes from other Spielberg films or because it features a successful and complex performance by Cruise. Others may be intrigued by its variations on the sci-fi thriller genre. Any of these pathways could be developed into a provocative essay about the film but only if those perspectives and ideas can be substantiated or proven useful, true, and important — that is, only if they can be shown to have objective accuracy.

One student decides to write a review of *Minority Report* for his college newspaper in anticipation of the film's upcoming appearance at the college art house. Because the film is more than ten years old, the writer presumes that many of his potential readers have not yet seen it and need both information and balanced opinions. He proceeds with a clear sense of what his readers already know, do not know, and need to know about the film.

Background information on the director and film helps provide context for readers.

Minority Report (2002) probably is not one of the best-known or most commonly discussed films by celebrity director Steven Spielberg. Most of us likely associate Spielberg with well-known popular thrillers like *Jaws* (1975) and *Jurassic Park* (1993) or historical blockbusters such as *Saving Private Ryan* (1998) and *Lincoln* (2012). Although *Minority Report* features megastar Tom Cruise, it is a quirkier and edgier movie than most of Spielberg's other films. Based on a novel by Philip K. Dick and part of a sci-fi heritage that extends from *Blade Runner* (1982) through *Inception* (2010), this futuristic story, set in 2054, is perhaps Spielberg's darkest and most complex effort.

Reviews should have a point of view.

Here the writer argues that the film engages viewers through the drama of its futuristic technology.

Although some of you may dash out to see this 2002 movie for the big-screen projection of Cruise as John Anderton, the real star of the film is the depiction of future technology and the ways that it may change our world. Anderton is a police officer whose unit oversees three human "precogs" linked to advanced computer technologies that allow the Pre-Crime Division to foresee and stop future murders. Everyone assumes this technological surveillance system is flawless and foolproof because it has kept Washington, D.C., free of all crime for several years. With an ingenious variation on the wrongly accused protagonist, however, Anderton discovers that he has himself been identified as a future murderer, which is when the plot suddenly takes off. Pursued by and pursuing the technological forces that define this future world (including mechanical spiders that invade any space and identify people by reading their eyes), Anderton weaves his way through a society that moves at incredible technological speeds and leaves no place to hide from its new powers to see into seemingly every corner of the world and individual minds.

A review usually features more plot summary than an analytical essay.

Like the *Bourne* movies of this same period, *Minority Report* is a fast-paced thriller in which Cruise as Anderton is both criminal and detective. More than portraying his flight to discover the truth about a crime and to redeem himself, however, the film provides a timely reflection on new technologies and our perhaps misguided trust of them. The danger in this Spielberg world is not sharks, German soldiers, or stubborn congressmen but the powerful technologies that can control our lives today.

The same writer later chooses to compose the following critical essay about *Minority Report* for a film history course. In this case, his readers are his professor

and the other students in the class, readers who are familiar with the film and have read other material about it. Note this student's inclusion of images from the film. These images do not serve merely as a visual embellishment for the paper but as concrete and precise evidence that supports his argument.

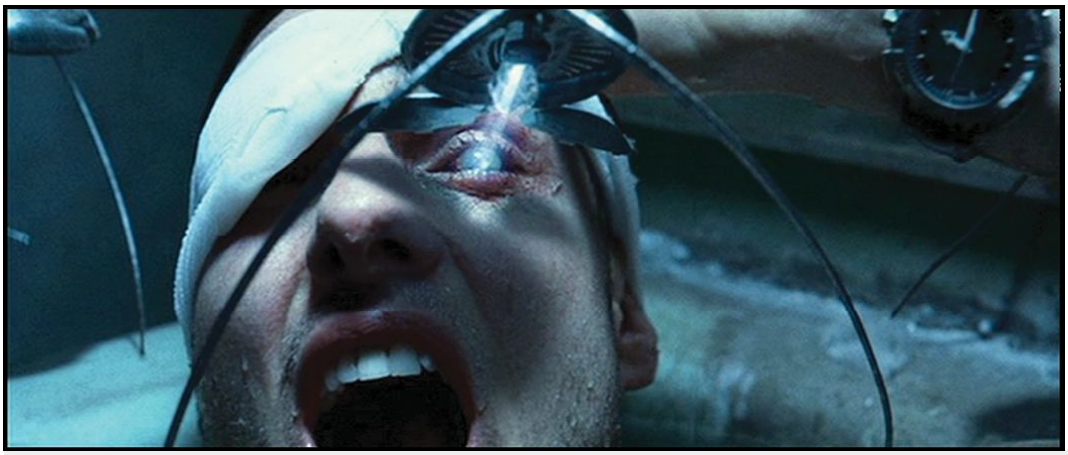
> The writer concentrates on one or two scenes to analyze in detail.

In the critical essays and reviews about *Minority Report*, viewers regularly praise the ingenious and elaborate plot and stunning cinematography that captures the blue tints of futuristic film noir. John Anderton, an officer in the Pre-Crime Division of Washington, D.C., in the year 2054, orchestrates the visions of three "precogs" through a complex computer system that foresees murders and thereby allows the police to stop them. When this seemingly infallible network accuses Anderton of a future crime, the system splits open, launching Anderton on a mission to save himself and to find the truth about lost "minority reports" that can expose the fallibility of the system. A surveillance film about sight and seeing with cutting-edge technologies and new media velocities **[Figure MR.1]**, *Minority Report* remains nonetheless Spielberg's typical family melodrama with its narrative of finding a way back home.

MR.1 ***Minority Report*** (2002). A thesis identifies an argument about sight, new technologies, and lost families.

At the heart of the film is an anxious and often excruciating drama about sight and seeing. The "precogs" threesome foresees the future as a dramatic indication of how

sight can now overcome conventional boundaries of time, and the surveillance technologies that suffuse the society describe astonishing ways that boundaries of space dissolve before the new technologies for seeing. In the midst of his flight, for example, Anderton hides in a decrepit apartment building, where the pursuing police release mechanical "identification spiders." At the start of the sequence, a precisely edited series of images reveals the various private spaces in the building, the release of the spiders, and their eerily rapid invasion of the different apartments. After they are inside, they open the most sensitive human interior, methodically lifting eyelids and taking electronic snapshots of the eyes as a way to identify the individuals **[Figure MR.2]**. Although Anderton escapes this onslaught by remaining submerged in a tub of water, he realizes that he must transplant his eyes as a way to remain unseen. Temporarily blind and carrying his own eyes in his pocket, Anderton searches for a truth that, despite the wonders of so much visionary technology and speed, can be discovered, as a drug dealer points out, only in the "world of the blind." Indeed, in this film, to see with insight into a world of visual deception becomes the critical challenge of survival.



MR.2 ***Minority Report*** (2002). Identification spiders eerily portray a way that futuristic technologies see into the most private spaces.

The writer's careful analysis of the details shows how they lead to a complex and subtle interpretation that some viewers may have missed.

Even as seeing grows more difficult and layered across many different visions and technologies, *Minority Report* remains, as most Spielberg films are, essentially about family — overcoming bad families and reestablishing good families. From the start, Anderton is a man traumatized by the mysterious abduction of his son and a separation from his wife. As a displacement of that trauma, he passionately immerses himself in the Pre-Crime Division, where he reinvents his lost family through a new father figure, Director Lamar Burgess. At the climactic conclusion of the film, however, Anderton — with the help of his pre-cog companion, Agatha — must confront this father figure. He projects a blurry montage that reveals a lost visual sequence that exposes Burgess's murder of Agatha's mother. Cutting between a dinner honoring Burgess, Agatha's struggle to mentally project those images, and the shocking display of those images on a screen at the banquet, the sequence recovers a lost past and creates an alternative film within the master surveillance film. In one sense, one cinematic vision of events replaces another, transforming the good father into the evil father who murdered a caring mother. Anderton's original devotion to the visual wonders of the Pre-Crime Division can be viewed, in large part, as a response to the traumatic loss of his family, and his discovery of new eyes and a new way of seeing through a blinded futuristic landscape leads directly to the dissolution of the myth of his spurious father and Pre-Crime Division family.

The writer expands his interpretation to show how it resonates through the entire film.

In the coda that concludes the film, the family units lost to technology have been restored. A rainy blue-tinted image slowly tracks across John's glassy apartment and moves in to show John and his now-pregnant wife reunited. The image then cuts to the three precogs intensely absorbed in books: the camera tracks through and out of a cabin on a bucolic lake where the precogs now "find relief from their gifts," an earlier world where high-tech visuals have been replaced with a rustic simplicity **[Figure MR.3]**. As with most Spielberg films, all the social, political, and technological threats to a traditional family have, apparently, been successfully dismissed as that family is reprojected into the past.

MR.3 ***Minority Report*** (2002). In the end, the film reestablishes the image of a peaceful family in a prelapsarian world.

Contextual Topics

Contextual topics usually focus on comparative analysis or cultural analysis. A **comparative analysis** evaluates features or elements of two or more different films or perhaps a film and its literary source. A comparative analysis might thus contrast Susan in *Bringing Up Baby* (1938) with one or more heroines in more recent films, such as Julia Child in *Julie & Julia* (2009) **[Figure 12.12]**. A comparative analysis always calls for some common ground in order to link what you are comparing and contrasting.

12.12 ***Julie & Julia*** (2009). The endearing and high-spirited Julia Child, as played by Meryl Streep, becomes a rich subject of a comparative analysis.

Conversely, **cultural analysis** interprets the relationship of a film to its place in history, society, or culture. Such a topic might examine historical contexts or debates that surround the film and help explain it — for example, in *Bringing Up Baby*, the social status of women or the importance of class in 1938 America. With historical or cultural analysis, the pertinence of the topic to understanding the film is crucial. In *Bringing Up Baby*, the role of women is important; the historical status of leopards probably is not.

After a topic has been selected (the more specific, the better), the writer should view the film again to refine and build on his or her initial notes. The writer who comes to *Bringing Up Baby* with a vague interest in how it portrays the battle of the sexes might, after seeing

the film again, wish to refocus the topic on how the leopard becomes a metaphor for that battle.

Elements of a Film Essay

Sketch an argument for your essay. What is the logic of its development? What conclusions do you foresee making?

Whether your chosen topic is a formal analysis of a sequence of shots or a comparison of a novel with its filmic adaptation, it will need to include a clear thesis statement, argument, and **evidence** (concrete details that convince readers of the validity of a writer's interpretation) to support your claims. Although different audiences may interpret all or part of a movie somewhat differently, a valid and interesting argument distinguishes itself by how well the analysis of evidence supports the thesis statement. Without good evidence, precise analysis, and logical argument, an essay will appear to be simply one viewer's impression or opinion.

Thesis Statement

Perhaps the most important element in a good analytical essay is the **thesis statement** — a short statement (often a single sentence) that succinctly describes and anticipates each stage of an essay's argument. The remainder of the essay should prove and support

that thesis with evidence. As a significantly refined version of the topic, the thesis statement articulates clearly the writer's critical perspective as an insightful argument about the film. It should indicate what is at stake in the argument and perhaps how that argument is important to understanding the film. A weak thesis statement introduces the essay vaguely and generally: "The Coen brothers' *Inside Llewyn Davis* (2013) describes a search for an identity." A strong thesis anticipates each stage of the argument that will follow in the paper: "The Coen brothers' *Inside Llewyn Davis* (2013) describes a search for an identity lost in 1961 New York City, with a cat named Ulysses signaling the path of that search as a circular odyssey about getting home to one's own self." A thesis statement often appears in the first paragraph of the essay and usually undergoes various revisions during the writing process. Having a working thesis (a rough version of a thesis) in mind as you begin your first draft, however, will help anchor your argument. In its final form, a precise and assertive thesis statement is likely to engage readers' interest in the essay.

VIEWING CUE

Write a precise thesis statement. Is your thesis specific enough, or does it need refinement? Is it sufficiently interesting to encourage readers to continue reading your essay?

As with most films, both David Mackenzie's *Hell or High Water* (2016) and Stephen Frears's *My Beautiful Laundrette* (1985) offer a wide variety of topics that could be developed into specific arguments and thesis statements. A writer might analyze *Hell or High Water* — a film about two brothers desperately driven to rob a series of banks in Texas — as either an allegory of the impoverished economics that underpin the narrative or as a mixture of the western and "road movie" genres **[Figure 12.13]**.

12.13 ***Hell or High Water*** (2016). Two brothers on a violent road reflect the hard times of a contemporary economic crisis.

For *My Beautiful Laundrette*, a contemporary romance between a young Pakistani man and a male friend involved with right-wing British gangs, a writer might weigh the advantages of two possible topics — the developing sexual relationship of the two main characters or the mise-en-scène of the coin-operated laundry where the climactic scenes take place **[Figure 12.14]**. After reflecting on

these topics and seeing the two films again, one student writer opts for the second film and develops a thesis statement that demonstrates a clear and specific direction: "*My Beautiful Laundrette* looks at contemporary British politics from numerous angles — family politics, sexual politics, racial politics, and economic politics. In the end, these various motifs coalesce and climax in a single space that is both practical and fantastic, the mise-en-scène of the laundrette." As clear and intelligent as it is, this proposed thesis statement probably will be revised for the final draft of the paper because the writing will generate new insights and possibly new issues. The student might decide to concentrate on only three of the various political angles or perhaps to argue that the politics of family, sex, and race in the film are all related to economics.

12.14 *My Beautiful Laundrette* (1985). The climactic mise-en-scène of the laundrette suggests an argument about politics in the United Kingdom.

Outline and Topic Sentences

Preparing an outline results in a valuable blueprint of an essay, allowing the writer to see and examine the different parts and overall development of the argument as it proceeds out of a strong thesis. An outline can consist of a simple list of ideas to address or shots and scenes to highlight (such as "weak father figures," "house squatting as metaphor for identity," and "description of the laundrette") or a more complete (and more useful) list that includes subheadings and perhaps full sentences, which can be used as topic sentences in the essay.

Here is an excerpt from the detailed outline prepared by the student working on the essay about *My Beautiful Laundrette*.

The Politics of Laundry in *My Beautiful Laundrette*

Working Thesis: *My Beautiful Laundrette* (1985) looks at contemporary British politics from numerous angles — family politics, sexual politics, racial politics, and economic politics. In the end, these various motifs coalesce and climax in a single space that is both practical and fantastic — the mise-en-scène of the coin-operated laundry.

I. Family politics is the most immediate and complicated type.
   A. Fathers and authority
   B. Family traditions and repression

II. Sexual politics underpins family situations in a way that exposes hypocrisy.
   A. Heterosexual politics: Nasser, his wife, and his mistress Rachel
   B. Feminist politics: Tania, Nasser's daughter
   C. Gay politics: Johnny and Omar
III. Racial politics permeates all other relationships, in a way that can be overlooked in this drama.
   A. Johnny, race, and right-wing politics (National Front)
   B. Papa, race, and left-wing politics
IV. Economic politics is where the other confrontations are — presumably and ironically — resolved.
   A. Papa as businessman
   B. Salim as drug dealer
   C. Johnny and Omar as laundry entrepreneurs
V. Political motifs coalesce and climax in a single space that is both practical and fantastic — the mise-en-scène of the launderette.
   A. Detailed description of mise-en-scène of launderette
   B. Pragmatic meets fantasy
   C. Analysis of climactic gathering

VIEWING CUE

Create a detailed outline of your essay. Does your outline include subsections that later can be developed with details and evidence from the film?

As this example illustrates, a detailed outline allows the writer to review the structure of the essay and note any problems with the scope or logic of the argument or with the transitions from one section to another. At this stage, the topic should be focused on a specific thesis whose parts develop as logical steps in the body of the paper — with each of the five topic sentences reflecting the working thesis and its development from one point to the next.

Whether or not you work from an outline, a clear organization and structure — most notably, coherent paragraphs introduced and linked by topic sentences — are essential for an effective essay. Well-developed paragraphs, which tend to consist of several sentences, demand coherence and evidence. Critical to a good paragraph is the **topic sentence** — a sentence (usually the first in a paragraph) that announces the central idea to which all other sentences within the paragraph are related. The remainder of the paragraph develops the idea stated in the topic sentence and provides evidence from the film as support.

In this excerpt from the essay on *My Beautiful Laundrette*, note how the strong and lucid topic sentence opening the paragraph is then supported by evidence:

> In *My Beautiful Laundrette*, the drama of the characters is invariably about space, territory, and most important, the idea of home. Although most of the characters are driven by the idea that, as one character puts it, "people should make up their minds where they want to live," places and homes are never more than shifting locations, foreign territory where one lives uncomfortably. In the first sequence, Salim and a henchman evict Johnny and another squatter from an abandoned tenement, and for the rest of the film the metaphor of squatting describes the characters' unstable and temporary relations to the places in which they live and with which they interact. In this sense, "home" is at best a dream and usually just a temporary convenience. Nasser's daughter Tania wants to be anywhere but with her family, and she is willing to have either Johnny or Omar as a lover, depending on who will take her away from her home. In the end, Nasser watches from a window as a medium shot shows Tania being visually swept off the platform by a series of trains that rush off the screen, on her way to another home that she will define for herself.

Following the topic of home as a key space in the film, the paragraph cogently traces its repetition through the experiences of the different characters, illustrating how it anchors and differentiates their lives and works as a central metaphor in the film.

Revising, Formatting, and Proofreading

A completed first draft of an essay is not a completed essay. The final stage in writing about film requires at least one revision of the paper, with special attention to manuscript format and proofreading. Last-minute corrections should be kept to a minimum and should be clear and simple.

A good revision begins by reading the essay with fresh eyes, achieved best by allowing time away from the first draft — at least a few hours and at best a few days — before returning to work on the revision. A revision should examine, clarify, and rewrite word choices, sentence structures, paragraphs, the logic and organization, and the coherence of the ideas. It should improve the presentation and the efficiency of the argument and analysis. In addition, carefully check the manuscript format, including margins, title position, footnotes, and other mechanics. Typically, the format for a film essay should follow guidelines published by the Modern Language Association (MLA).

After your final revision is completed, proofreading — checking the revision for grammatical and structural errors, typos, or omissions that can be easily corrected — is essential. With any kind of writing, the presentation helps determine how your reader views your work, and an accurate, professional look will promote an accurate, professional reading of it. Typographical mistakes and other small errors do not ruin a good essay, but they undermine it by creating an impression of carelessness. Keeping a checklist of these mechanics in mind can alleviate much of the anxiety about writing, providing a working framework that leads to stronger and more interesting essays.

Writer's Checklist

After writing your first draft, revise your thesis statement to reflect changes in your thinking. Be sure to sharpen your thesis statement to describe your argument more accurately.

As you grow more confident as a writer, you will be able to write about films in a fluid motion as you watch the film, take some notes, sketch an outline, and write the first draft and final essay. Even the most competent writers, however, pause to reflect on their work by consulting a checklist like this one:

1. Review your notes, filling in details where you can. Ideally, view the film one more time.
2. Try to summarize the most important themes or motifs in the film.
3. Formulate a working thesis and an argument for the essay.
4. Outline the argument. If possible, use full sentences for headings because they can then become your topic sentences.
5. Develop the central idea of each paragraph by using details from the film that support that paragraph's topic sentence.
6. Rewrite your thesis statement to reflect any changes or refinements in your thinking that occurred while you were writing your first draft.
7. If you are writing a research essay, be sure to use the correct documentation format for in-text citations and the Works Cited list (see the Documentation Format section later in this chapter).
8. Revise your essay, checking for problems such as vague or illogical organization, and proofread for surface errors in spelling and grammar.
9. Select a title that reflects the main argument of your paper.
10. Print out the essay, and correct any remaining typographical errors.

Researching the Movies

Although in some critical film essays writers aim to convey a simple personal response to a film based on critical distance and careful reflection, in other essays they might use research to sharpen and develop their interpretation of a film. Research enables writers to identify significant issues surrounding a film and to contribute their opinions and ideas to the ongoing critical dialogue about it. A student intending to write about Denzel Washington's *Fences* (2016), for example, may be intrigued by the film but uncertain about his or her specific argument. With some reading and research about August Wilson's 1985 play on which the film is based, about the performances of Washington and Viola Davis in adapting Wilson's characters, and about some other prominent discussions of adapting literature to film, the student might discover a specific argument about the complications of adapting a theatrical plot and characters to the cinema **[Figure 12.15]**.

12.15 ***Fences*** (2016). Researching this film also may mean researching the original Pulitzer Prize–winning play on which it is based.

Distinguishing Research Materials

Whether limited or extensive, research helps determine why your essay is important and what critical questions are at stake in writing it. Research is also a dialogue with other opinions and writings that help distinguish or support your ideas about a film or group of films. Various kinds of materials qualify as research sources for a film essay, including primary, secondary, and internet resources.

Whatever the source of the research, it is imperative, especially when researching film and media, to distinguish scholarly books and journals from popular books and magazines. Good information or insights can sometimes be discovered in popular magazines, such as *Entertainment Weekly*, that write about movies, stars, and industry events, but a strong analytical essay will build and support its

positions with sources from scholarly books, journals or sites, such as *Film Quarterly* or *Sight and Sound*. While the former tends to rely on personal observations or even hearsay and gossip, the latter publishes material only after it has been peer-reviewed and vetted by experts in the field in order to be certain the argument is sound and original. Always prioritize scholarly sources for your research.

Primary Research

Primary research sources — original sources in formats such as 16mm films, videotapes, DVDs, and film scripts; documents from the time of the film's production; and new research data — have a direct relationship with the original film. Some of these materials are readily available in libraries, including the many classic scripts now published as books. Others, such as 16mm films, can be difficult to locate except in film archives. A student planning to write a research essay on Don Siegel's *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956) might first view a 16mm or DVD projection of that film and then access other primary sources (such as a script) as follow-ups to the first screening **[Figure 12.16]**. Primary sources may approximate but not duplicate exactly the look of a film that is seen in a theater. The format used in streaming sites and DVDs may be different from the format used in theatrical screenings, and scripts may represent a simple blueprint from which the actual film dialogue deviates.

12.16 ***Invasion of the Body Snatchers*** (1956). Watching a film closely and following its script allows you to analyze it with precision and depth.

Secondary Research

Secondary research sources — including books, critical articles, websites, supplementary DVD materials, and newspaper reviews — contain ideas or information from outside sources such as film critics or scholars. The student researching *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* might include film reviews published at the time of release, scholarly essays on Siegel's work, and perhaps a book on 1950s American cinema. Libraries and their databases are the most reliable places to find solid secondary materials. Check databases such as the Humanities International Index and LexisNexis for essays and books on your subject. Annual bibliographic indexes — especially the *Readers' Guide to Periodical Literature*, the *MLA*

International Bibliography, and the *Film & Television Literature Index with Full Text* — identify journals and books that may support and broaden your thinking. After you have a topic and a working thesis, you can search for sources relevant to your topic and argument. Rather than checking general categories like "film," "cinema," and "movies," a more precise topic (such as "contemporary Australian cinema" or "sound technology and the movies") will lead you more quickly to pertinent research materials.

In addition to databases and bibliographic indexes, specialized encyclopedias, which identify important topics and figures in film studies, are useful resources for initiating research on a film. These sources provide factual information about and short introductions to a subject. The entries typically do not offer the detailed analysis or arguments required for a good research paper, but they can suggest pertinent information and issues that can lead you to more research and a refined argument.

Internet Sources

The internet offers access to various library and media catalogs and numerous other information sites. However, with so many websites available, the writer must be careful to consult the three kinds of reputable internet sources for film studies:

- sites and databases that provide basic facts about a film and the individuals involved with that film, including biographical facts

about the director, the running time of a film, and its year of release
- sites that offer reviews or essays from academic film journals, such as *Film Comment, Jump Cut*, and *Sight and Sound*
- film-specific sites that provide information ranging from production facts to reviews and interviews; most major films have websites, as do the studios and distributors

Although the internet is an important source of information of all kinds, film researchers and writers must be cautious about the quality of the material found there. For one thing, it can be difficult to determine the authenticity of some internet-based information. Unlike material published in academic journals or books, internet essays and articles may not have been through a review process to determine their value. Virtually anyone can post on a website any opinion or "facts," often without substantial evidence. When using the internet for research, therefore, writers need to differentiate substantial and useful material from chat and frivolous commentary. Especially with internet sources, there are three important rules to follow:

- Determine the quality of the source. Does it provide reliable information and a carefully evaluated argument supported by research? Is the source a refereed publication (one whose material is evaluated by experts) or a reputable institution? Is its information supported by references to other research? What are the credentials of the authors?

- Define your search as precisely as possible. Instead of just the title of a film, focus your search on, for example, "lighting in *Double Indemnity*" or "politics and Iranian cinema." Pursue your topic through the advanced search option.
- Explore links to other sites. Does your research link you to sites on other films by the same director or to related issues such as the film genre or the country in which the film was made?

Here is a short list of websites useful for film research:

- *American Film Institute* (www.afi.com): recent industry news, events, educational seminars, and reviews
- *Berkeley Media Resources Center* (www.lib.berkeley.edu/libraries/media-resources-center): a collection of online bibliographies and sources for film and media studies
- *Columbia Film Language Glossary* (filmglossary.ccnmtl.columbia.edu): a teaching tool from Columbia University featuring clips and visual annotations of key terms in film studies
- *The Criterion Collection* (www.criterion.com): distributor of well-known masterpieces of international art cinema, Hollywood classics, and often overlooked gems from film history
- *Fandor* (www.fandor.com): features video essays and articles on current world film culture and a subscription service of curated films
- *Film & Television Literature Index with Full Text* (https://www.ebsco.com/products/research-databases/film-

television-literature-index-full-text): an index, with more than two thousand subject heads, of the publications in 150 film and media journals

- *FilmSound.org* (www.filmsound.org): covers all topics related to film sound — including definitions of terms, links to scholarly articles, and interviews with sound designers — and is useful for students and practitioners
- *Internet Movie Database* (www.imdb.com): complete credits, plot summaries, links to reviews, and background information on individual films
- [*in*]*Transition: Journal of Videographic Film & Moving Image Studies* (mediacommons.org/intransition/): online, peer-reviewed journal of video essays with commentary, including an extensive resources page with valuable information on how to create film scholarship in this format
- *Media History Digital Library* (mediahistoryproject.org): award-winning, extensive free collection of easily searchable digitized publications from the history of film, broadcasting, and recorded sound; includes data visualization tools
- *Moving Image Research Center* (www.loc.gov/rr/mopic): the Library of Congress catalog that includes the National Film Registry preservation list, the American Memory Collection of online early films, and other materials
- *Oxford Bibliographies Online* (www.oxfordbibliographiesonline.com): annotated and regularly updated bibliographies on a wide variety of topics in film and media studies

- *Society for Cinema and Media Studies* (www.cmstudies.org): academic society dedicated to the scholarly study of film, television, and new media
- *UbuWeb* (www.ubu.com): allows users to download rare and remarkable documents from literary, film, video, and music history, such as a Dadaist magazine from 1917 or a documentary on Andy Warhol
- *Women Film Pioneers Project* (wfpp.cdrs.columbia.edu): freely accessible, collaborative online database on the hundreds of women who worked behind the scenes in the silent film industry worldwide, as directors, producers, editors, and more

VIEWING CUE

Search the internet for information about your film and topic, and locate at least one useful source. What distinguishes this source from other online information about your topic?

FILM IN FOCUS Interpretation, Argument, and Evidence in *Rashomon* (1950)

See also: *Citizen Kane* (1941); *The Usual Suspects* (1995); *Inception* (2010)

FILM IN FOCUS
LaunchPad

To watch a clip from *Rashomon* (1950), go to LaunchPad for *The Film Experience* at **launchpadworks.com**

After reviewing his notes on Akira Kurosawa's *Rashomon* (1950), a student writer considers some possible topics. He begins by thinking about the film's unusual narrative structure. Three men, including a priest, seek shelter from a rainstorm under an ancient city gate, where they hear the tale of a murder and rape through four different points of view — those of a bandit, the woman, the ghost of the dead man, and a woodcutter. The narrative tension in the film, the writer realizes, develops around the discrepancies in these competing points of view, which result in a dark ambiguity about the truth of this violent and tragic event. After seeing the film again and trying to refine his thinking about it, the writer develops the following thesis:

> In Akira Kurosawa's *Rashomon* (1950), three men hear four different versions of the truth about a violent attack. After audience members see and hear these various perspectives and are presented with the evidence, they share in the opening confusion of the three men, setting the stage for the only possible response to a world defined by egotism and uncertainty — compassion.

The student's next step is to sketch an outline in which he uses topic sentences to mark the development of the argument and the places where key evidence will appear.

Rashomon: Beyond Understanding and Evidence

Thesis statement: *Rashomon* is a drama of evidence and interpretation.

I. Central to this film is the drama of interpretation and evidence.
   A. Four accounts of same horrifying event
   B. The opening focus on evidence
II. Although more evidence appears through the perspectives of the four witnesses, that evidence does not always agree and seems to befuddle a clear interpretation.
   A. Overlaps and inconsistencies in describing the facts
   B. The dagger as key piece of evidence
III. The heart of the fragmented narratives of *Rashomon* is the egotism that fashions the various perspectives.
   A. The bandit's violent sexual desire and the crime

B. His story of conquest and surrender

IV. Both the wife's and the husband's perspectives are likewise mostly about themselves.

A. The wife's tale of a helpless woman

B. The husband's tale of honor and self-sacrifice

V. The woodcutter's narrative is more problematic but equally locked into his own needs for self-justification and protection.

A. His revised vision: a base and cowardly world

B. His acknowledgment that he took the evidence of the dagger

VI. Each of these perspectives is distorted by the ethical failures of the individuals telling them, indicating the horrifying indeterminacy of a world determined by isolated egos, as well as the corruption of these perspectives by human egotism.

A. Natural disaster and moral depravity

B. Editing and shot compositions that add to confusion, disorientation, and failure to see facts and events clearly

VII. Although the humane conclusion of the film seems unexpected (and somewhat sentimental), its unexpectedness makes the film engage with modern times.

After writing his first draft, the writer sets aside the paper for three days before undertaking a careful revision. He proofreads a printed version of the essay and then submits his final copy, which follows.

Fred Stillman
Professor White
Film 101
10 Feb. 2020

Beyond Understanding and Evidence:

The Surprise of Compassion in *Rashomon*

A brief summary of the film is followed by a concise thesis that maps out the main points of the paper's argument.

The setting that opens and closes Akira Kurosawa's *Rashomon* (1950) is the collapsed Rashomon gate in the ancient city of Kyoto. Amidst a torrential rainstorm, a woodcutter, a commoner, and a priest huddle together, and the first recounts a horrifying tale of rape, murder, and possibly suicide told through four different perspectives that structure the narrative of the film. Seen through the eyes of a criminal, the female victim, the dead husband, and a woodcutter, each perspective offers a contrasting version of events and the truth of what happened, and each introduces pieces of evidence to support that particular version. Despite having heard these witnesses, however, the priest can only murmur, "I don't understand." At the film's conclusion, moreover, the uncertainty of the men is more pervasive than ever, setting the stage for the only possible response to a world defined by egotism and uncertainty — compassion.

The initial topic sentence introduces the first part of the argument.

Rashomon is a drama of evidence and interpretation. As the priest and woodcutter explain to the commoner, the original staging of the different testimonies was a police court trying to gather evidence about a horrible crime in which a noblewoman and her husband were attacked in the wilderness: she was raped and he was killed. Appropriately, the first point of view presented is that of the woodcutter, who follows a trail of evidence through the woods — a woman's hat, a man's hat, a belt, and an amulet case — to the sudden discovery of the dead body of the samurai nobleman, his stiffened arms and hands stretched grotesquely toward the horrified woodcutter in a low-angle shot **[Figure R.1]**. Shortly thereafter, a man describes how he captured the bandit Tajomaru, emphasizing the discovered evidence of the samurai's horse as well as "seventeen arrows" and a "Korean sword" found on the criminal. Yet this seemingly incontestable claim and evidence become subject to doubt when the bandit suddenly denounces and denies the man's interpretation of certain details.

R.1 ***Rashomon*** (1950). The woodcutter's perspective sheds light on the mystery of a horrifying death.

Although more evidence is given through the perspective of the other witnesses, that evidence does not always agree, and it seems to befuddle a clear interpretation. Most important, the significance of a pearl-handled dagger, the weapon that supposedly killed the husband, changes dramatically in the different narratives, acting as an evidential marker to distinguish the interpretations of events.

Focused on the shifting place of the dagger, the center of the fragmented narratives of *Rashomon* becomes the egotism that informs each perspective. Or more exactly, each version becomes more about the personal desire and greed of the person explaining what happened than about the factual events and evidence. What initiates the horrendous crime is the violent sexual desire of the bandit, who happens to witness — in a sharp-shot/reverse-shot exchange beginning with his awakening eyes — the exposed face and feet of the wife. After that, his entire account emphasizes greed and desire: he deceives and entraps the nobleman by suggesting he will sell him riches from an old tomb, and his leering gaze at the young woman turns quickly to a brutal sexual attack. Not surprisingly, in the bandit's version, his desires and demands fulfill the woman, and she becomes the mirror image of his greed and lust when she

ecstatically surrenders to his assault. At this moment, the critical object, the dagger, drops passively from her hand, according to the bandit, who claims to then kill the husband "honestly."

Both the wife's and the husband's perspectives are likewise mostly about themselves. From the beginning, she appears discreet and demure, partly hidden by veils and white makeup and barely moving as she rides her horse through the forest. In her account, she becomes a "poor helpless woman" whose husband turns viciously on her after the assault. Unable to bear his hateful stare, she claims to have fainted — only to later discover her dagger in her husband's chest. The husband's narrative, in contrast, paints a picture of his suffering devotion and lost honor, weeping from the grave as he recounts killing himself with the controversial dagger. Light and shadow fill the images of this account, suggesting an ambiguity and lack of certainty even in this testimony by a dead man.

> Excellent visual detail indicates that the writer's interpretation is grounded in film form and not just content.

Finally, the woodcutter's narrative is more problematic but equally locked into his own needs for self-justification and protection. After introducing the story at the beginning of the film, he returns to offer a final version that reveals deceptions and lies in his first account. Now he admits to having witnessed the entire scene. His subsequent description of the partly clownish, partly terrified fighting of the two men shows a world that is fundamentally base and cowardly, a reflection of his own base and cowardly position in failing to intervene or fully disclose the truth of what he saw. Most disturbing perhaps, he tacitly acknowledges stealing the crucial piece of evidence, the dagger, in order to sell it for personal gain.

That each of these perspectives is distorted by different degrees of ethical failure on the part of the individual indicates the source of the horrifying indeterminacy and chaos of this world [**Figure R.2**]. This is a world described by the priest in the opening as full of "war, earthquake, wind, fire, famine, plague … each year full of disaster … hundreds of men dying like animals." Stylistically, the stunning editing and shot compositions of *Rashomon* dramatize this world of confusion and disorientation, in which seeing and understanding seem to constantly combat each other. Witnesses are introduced with a wipe that crosses the screen in one direction or the other,

almost violently wiping out the perspective of the preceding account. Within the different accounts, rapid tracks and flash pans re-create the desperately unsettled struggle to discover facts through perspectives that dart across surfaces blocked by branches and leaves.

R.2 ***Rashomon*** (1950). The listeners are left trying to make meaning in a chaotic world.

Within all this moral darkness and despair, however, the conclusion of *Rashomon* suggests a possible way out of the terror and blindness that results from so much visual and narrative ambiguity. In this final sequence, the threesome who tell and hear that tale of violence discover an abandoned baby in the ruins of the gate. The commoner urges them to steal the baby's blankets and clothing because "you can't live unless you're what you call selfish." At this point, a dramatic turn occurs: in a head-to-head confrontation in the rain, the commoner accuses the woodcutter of hiding his theft of that crucial piece of evidence, the dagger. In dazed silence, the priest and the woodcutter stand against a wall. As the rain stops, the commoner suddenly insists on taking the child home with him to his already crowded family. Despite his shame about his selfishness and despite the missing evidence of the stolen dagger, a glimmer of human value returns to the world. Compassion

overcomes the evidence of mistakes, and as they all depart, the sun gleams through the clouds, and the saved child becomes the emblem of a new future. During this sequence, the priest shouts the fundamental truth so often lost in this violent courtroom: “If men don’t trust each other, then the world becomes a hell.”

The conclusion recalls the main points of the argument and expands it to claim a broader meaning for the film.

Although this conclusion seems unexpected (and somewhat sentimental), its unexpectedness engages the film with modern times. Danish philosopher and theologian Søren Kierkegaard uses the term “leap of faith” to describe the only possibility for a spiritual faith in modern times. His term implies that both spiritual and human faith — the grounds for ethical behavior — often occur despite the evidence before our eyes and despite the failure of human reason to understand it. As in *Rashomon*, truth and morality may need to leap over the confusion of facts and logic simply to do what is right.

Using Film Images in Your Paper

With computer and internet technologies, writers can now easily capture film images from a DVD or streaming video and incorporate them in a critical essay to illustrate a part of an argument and analysis. “Quoting” from a film to support an interpretation or insight can provide the evidence that underpins a strong argument.

Many instructors prefer that students avoid using images because these images often function simply as ornaments and distract from the real work of the writing. Therefore, if film images are used in an

essay, they should be used sparingly to support a key point in the argument. As with the example from the paper on *Minority Report* (2002) (see the Film in Focus feature earlier in this chapter), a specific image or series of images can illustrate important visual information (about image composition or editing, for example) that your text discusses. If useful, provide a short caption that encapsulates what you wish your reader to see in the images.

Using and Documenting Sources

Writers gather research material in a variety of ways: some record paragraphs and phrases on handwritten note cards, while others prefer to type that material directly into their computers, allowing them to sort, move, and insert text easily. In either case, the bibliographic information for quotations should be double-checked for accuracy. It should include all of the publication data required for the Works Cited list (and sometimes the Works Consulted section) of your research paper. Just as sloppy technical errors (such as a boom microphone appearing in a frame) can undermine a film's look and effect, inaccurate or careless source documentation can make a research paper look amateurish and unreliable.

Integrating research material into the text of your paper requires both logic and rhetoric. Sometimes research can be used to describe how your argument differs from prevailing positions on a film or an issue. In this case, the writer frequently identifies one or more

opposing positions to highlight how the essay will distinguish itself: "Although Annette Michelson has claimed that Lev Kuleshov's films are best understood as part of a debate with Sergei Eisenstein, this paper argues that the French films of Jean Epstein are equally important to Kuleshov's development." Conversely, research can be used to support and validate a point or a part of the overall argument: "Both Patrice Petro and Judith Mayne have produced complex feminist readings of silent-era German films that support my interpretation of *Mädchen in Uniform* (1931)." Yet another possibility is to use research sources to back up the validity of facts or critical frameworks necessary for introducing an argument: "In *The Zero Hour: Glasnost and Soviet Cinema in Transition*, Andrew Horton and Michael Brashinsky convincingly show that Russian cinema after 1985 returned to the center of the world stage, an argument that will provide the background for my claims about the importance of *Little Vera* (1989) in Europe and America."

Direct Quotations and Paraphrasing

As you prepare to integrate research into your essay, think about a particular quote or critical position you will argue against. What factual or historical material will support your argument? Note passages you can use to bolster a central part of your essay.

After research material has been gathered, selected, and integrated into an essay, all of the sources used must be properly documented. Two kinds of research material require documentation — (1) a direct quotation from a secondary source and (2) a paraphrase, in which the writer puts the idea or observation from another source into his or her own words. When information is considered common knowledge and is well known to most people, there is no need to document where you found it. If, however, there is any doubt about whether the observation is common knowledge, always document the source to avoid any suspicion of plagiarism. For example, a critic's remark that Ousmane Sembène is one of Africa's premier filmmakers and that his films work in a realist tradition would be considered common knowledge by many seasoned filmgoers. But a writer new to Sembène's work may feel more comfortable documenting the source of that information and, like all writers, should *never* risk the charge of plagiarism. Quotations of dialogue from a film usually do not require documentation.

TECHNOLOGY IN ACTION

Creating a Video Essay

Media scholarship is increasingly produced using media tools, allowing critics and scholars to use moving images and sound to develop an audiovisual argument suited to an audiovisual medium. Many students are “digital natives” who are familiar with video capturing and editing tools and techniques. They may think about film differently than previous generations because of their experiences with remixed and excerpted work and combined images and texts (in memes, gifs, and platforms like Snapchat and Instagram). Video essays make arguments about a film or films by combining language with moving or still images, sounds, and graphic elements through editing and recording. They may be analytical, personal, or poetic, and because they are examples of “transformative works,” video essays may legally make limited fair use of copyrighted material. One online, peer-reviewed journal of videographic criticism is *[in]Transition*, and many less scholarly examples of the format can be found online.

The following summary of the steps you might follow to create a video essay uses *Touch of Evil* (1958) as an example. More detailed information about this process can be found on the Resources page of *[in]Transition*.

1. State your argument simply: “His role as the corrupt police detective Quinlan in the film noir *Touch of Evil* provides ironic commentary on director Orson Welles’s status in Hollywood at the end of the 1950s.”
2. Select evidence — in this case, four short clips that show the film's opening shot, the introduction to Quinlan, the tarot card reader’s pronouncement that Quinlan’s future is “all used up,” and Quinlan falling dead into the river at the end of the film **[Figures TE.1–TE.4]**.
3. Write a short script, basing your argument on the evidence.
4. Import or digitize the clips and compile them using iMovie or an equivalent editing program.
5. Write and record your script, and add it to the timeline.
6. Edit sound levels, and add onscreen text or graphics, credits, and citations.
7. Apply for a Creative Commons license so you can share your work.

TE.1 ***Touch of Evil*** (1958). The film's opening shot is an elaborately choreographed long take, lasting three and a half minutes.

TE.2 ***Touch of Evil*** (1958). Corrupt detective Hank Quinlan (Orson Welles) arrives at the crime scene.

TE.3 ***Touch of Evil*** (1958). A fortune teller (Marlene Dietrich) tells Quinlan that he has no future.

TE.4 ***Touch of Evil*** (1958). Quinlan, shot dead, falls into a lake at the film's climax.

VIEWING CUE

To watch the sample video essay described here, go to LaunchPad for *The Film Experience* at **launchpadworks.com**

Documentation Format

There are various documentation formats for listing authors, titles, and publication data. Here we describe the format advocated by the Modern Language Association (MLA) and widely used in the humanities. See *MLA Handbook*, 8th ed. (2016). The primary components of the MLA format are in-text citations and the Works Cited list. An in-text citation is required wherever the writer refers to or quotes from a research source within the essay's text. The in-text citation includes the author's name and the page number, enclosed in parentheses. Note that "p." and "pp." are not used for in-text citations but are used in the list of Works Cited.

> Filmmakers such as Stan Brakhage and Jonas Mekas "appropriated home-movie style as a formal manifestation of a spontaneous, untampered form of filmmaking" (Zimmerman 146).

When the author's name appears in the discussion that introduces the quotation, only the page number or numbers are given.

> As Patricia Zimmerman has noted, filmmakers such as Stan Brakhage and Jonas Mekas "appropriated home-movie style as a formal manifestation of a spontaneous, untampered form of filmmaking" (146).

The same citation formats are used whether the material is quoted directly or paraphrased.

> Much of the American avant-garde movement experimented not so much with the techniques of modern art but with the spontaneous actions associated with home movies (Zimmerman 146).

When you use two or more sources by the same author in your essay, you must distinguish among them by including an abbreviated version of the title. The title can be part of the introductory text, as in "Zimmerman writes in *Reel Families* … " or in the parenthetical citation: "(Zimmerman, *Reel Families* 146)." Each source cited in the text must also appear in the Works Cited section with full bibliographic detail.

Another type of annotation is the content note or explanatory note, which may or may not include secondary sources. These notes offer background information on the topic being discussed or on related issues, suggest related readings, or offer an aside. They should be placed on a separate page after the text (but before the Works Cited list) or as footnotes at the bottom of the page. Thus a writer discussing horror films and Brian De Palma's *Carrie* (1976) might include this text and content note:

> Although *Carrie* focuses on female anxiety and violence, it is difficult to pinpoint a specific audience for this film.[1]

[1]Especially since *Psycho* (1960), horror films seem fixated on violence against women, but there is good reason to consider how both female and male audiences identify with these films. An important discussion of this issue is Carol Clover's *Men, Women, and Chain Saws* (3–21).

Full documentation for every source cited in your essay should be included in the **Works Cited** section, positioned on a separate page immediately after the last page of the essay text. Sources that have been consulted but not cited in the text or notes of the essay can be included in an optional **Works Consulted** section, which follows on a separate page after the Works Cited list. (Note that for reasons of space, we do not show the Works Cited and Works Consulted sections as separate pages in the essay reproduced below.) Punctuation of the different entries must be absolutely correct. Titles of books and films should be typed in italics. Examples of some of the most common types of Works Cited entries follow.

Book by One Author

Zimmerman, Patricia. *Reel Families: A Social History of Amateur Film.* Indiana UP, 1995.

Book by More Than One Author

Bordwell, David, Janet Staiger, and Kristin Thompson. *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style and Mode of Production to 1960.* Columbia UP, 1985.

Edited Book

Cook, Pam, and Mieke Bernink, eds. *The Cinema Book.* 2nd ed. British Film Institute, 1999.

Article in an Anthology of Film Criticism

Gaines, Jane. "Dream/Factory." *Reinventing Film Studies,* edited by Christine Gledhill and Linda Williams. Arnold, 2000, pp. 100–13.

Journal Article

Spivak, Gayatri. "In Praise of *Sammy and Rosie Get Laid." Critical Quarterly* vol. 31, no. 2, 1989, pp. 80–88.

Article in a Daily or Weekly Periodical

Corliss, Richard. "Suddenly Shakespeare." *Time,* 4 Nov. 1996, pp. 88–90.

Interview (Printed)

Seberg, Jean. Interview by Mark Rappaport. "I, Jean Seberg." *Film Quarterly* vol. 55, no. 1, 2001, pp. 2–13.

Article in an Online Journal

Include the URL after the access date only if your instructor requires it or readers would need it to find the website.

Firshing, Robert. "Italian Horror in the Seventies." *Images Journal*, 8 Nov. 2001.

Information from a Website

"*Magnolia* (1999)." *Internet Movie Database*, Amazon, http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0175880/.

A DVD or Blu-Ray

Include the director, main performers, and original release date of the film, followed by the distributor and year of release.

Fearless. Directed by Peter Weir, performances by Jeff Bridges, Isabella Rossellini, and Rosie Perez. 1993. Warner Home Video, 1999.

Keep in mind that plagiarism — using sources without giving the proper credit to them — is one of the most serious offenses in writing and research. For more information on attribution formats for other types of sources, consult the *MLA Handbook*, 8th ed. (2016).

FILM IN FOCUS From Research to Writing about *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1920)

See also: *Spellbound* (1945); *Eyes Without a Face* (1960); *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991)

To watch a clip from *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1920), go to LaunchPad for *The Film Experience* at **launchpadworks.com**

A student writer who is responding to the strange look and feel of this silent film from Germany and looking for some basic information might start her research by examining the introductory material in David A. Cook's *History of Narrative Film* (5th ed., 2016). In the index, she checks various headings (such as "German cinema" and "Weimar cinema"), the title of the film, and the name of its director (Robert Wiene). Next, she searches the internet by entering the title of the film in a search engine, which results in dozens of different websites. Although much of the internet information is too general, she keeps a list of her web sources and their bibliographic details, noting one site that provides early reviews of the film. Even this preliminary research starts to shape her thinking about a topic involving the period known as the Weimar era.

Following this preliminary work, the writer then checks the databases at her college library for more substantial critical books and essays on the Weimar period in German history. This initial search leads her to dozens of books and critical articles, but she decides to concentrate on books that deal with films made during the Weimar period. She discovers numerous scholarly studies devoted to this particular film culture and even whole books devoted to *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*. She reads and takes notes on appropriate sections of well-known books, such as Siegfried Kracauer's *From Caligari to Hitler: A Psychological History of the German Film* (2004) and Lotte H. Eisner's *The Haunted Screen: Expressionism in the German Cinema and the Influence of Max Reinhardt* (2008). She also consults two scholarly books — Mike Budd's edited collection The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari: *Texts, Contexts, Histories* (1990) and Thomas Elsaesser's *Weimar Cinema and After: Germany's Historical Imaginary* (2000).

Armed with information about how the Weimar era became the prelude to fascism and the rise of Adolf Hitler, the writer realizes she needs to refine her topic so that she has a more focused thesis. She reviews the film on DVD and realizes that the violence and horror seem connected to the social context of a prefascist Germany. As her thesis about social violence begins to take shape, she returns to the library, where she finds a good study of film violence — Stephen Prince's edited collection, *Screening Violence* (2000).

With each step, the writer makes notes, double-checks quotations for accuracy, and records accurate bibliographic information on all the sources she consults. As she formulates her thesis statement and constructs an outline, she tries to indicate where the different parts of her research would be most effective in directing and supporting her argument. Her final essay, reproduced here, demonstrates the important contribution that careful research makes to writing about film.

Mia Thompson
Professor Corrigan
Film Criticism 101
10 Dec. 2019

History, Violence, and *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*

Background research clearly sets up the writer's argument.

In his detailed study of *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1920), Mike Budd identifies the complex cultural history of the film's arrival in the United States. When the film premiered in New York on April 3, 1921, it followed a well-crafted promotion and distribution campaign that stressed *Dr. Caligari*'s novelty, global appeal, and generic formulas. One 1921 poster identifies the film as "a mystery story that holds the public in suspense every minute," while another describes it as "thrilling, fantastic, bizarre, gripping." However accurate these descriptions may be, these promotions, as Budd notes, intentionally present the film "out of context, [with] its origins both cultural and national deliberately obscured" (56–58).

The thesis statement announces the argument.

That obfuscation has continued to dog *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* in the many decades since its initial release, so that American and other viewers have remained less attuned to the specific historical and social realities dramatized in the film than to the psychological mysteries played out in its thrills, fantasies, and horror. Exploring the social drama of *Dr. Caligari* reconnects the film more concretely to its original German context and makes clear that this film is about national unrest and violence, both of which are far more historically tangible than the usually acknowledged fantasy of the film's madmen and monsters.

This summary paragraph assumes readers know the film but refreshes their memory of its story and plot.

The film's story tells of the hypnotist Dr. Caligari, who comes to a town with a carnival **[Figure CDC.1]**. In his sideshow act, Caligari presents Cesare, a somnambulist who can supposedly see the future. At the same time, a series of murders occurs in the town. Francis, a student who discovers that Caligari and Cesare are behind the killings, pursues Caligari to an insane asylum. The final twist occurs when the narrative shifts its perspective and we discover the truth: Francis has been the narrator of the tale, he is in fact the mad patient in the asylum, and Caligari is the kind director of the hospital allowing Francis to tell his delusional tale.[1]

CDC.1 ***The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*** (1920). The malevolence or benevolence of Caligari is left to the viewer to determine.

A content note provides additional information about a point raised in the text.

This overview of a major scholarly position establishes the writer's authority and prepares readers for what will distinguish her argument.

When first watching this film, most viewers understandably fixate on the exaggerated sets and backdrop paintings. These factors, together with the twisted narrative that turns the story into the vision of a madman, place this film squarely in the cultural and aesthetic tradition of expressionism — a movement in which unconscious or unseen forces create a world distorted by personal fears, desires, and anxieties. According to this position, Cesare acts out the evil unconscious of Caligari, while the violence and chaos associated with that unconscious spread through the entire community.

This image shows a main character, followed by a caption that identifies a key question in the film and the student's argument about that character.

Many critics have, in fact, made intelligent connections between the psychological underpinnings of expressionism and the German society that, bereft of so many fathers after the devastation of World War I, gravitated toward malevolent authority figures. Most famously, Siegfried Kracauer's *From Caligari to Hitler: A Psychological Study of the German Film* offers the most direct statement of Dr. Caligari as the unconscious of a social history predicting the imminent arrival of fascism **[Figure CDC.2]**. He writes that Caligari becomes "a premonition of Hitler" (72):

CDC.2 ***The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*** (1920). Is the doctor's persona a premonition of Hitler?

A succinct quotation sums up a complex critical viewpoint. Because it is more than four lines in length, the quotation is presented without quotation marks in an indented block format.

> Whether intentionally or not, *Caligari* exposes the soul wavering between tyranny and chaos, and facing a desperate situation: any escape from tyranny seems to throw it into a state of utter confusion. Quite logically, the film spreads an all-pervading atmosphere of horror. Like the Nazi world, that of *Caligari* overflows with sinister portents, acts of terror and outbursts of panic. (74)

Against the backdrop of these other critical positions, the writer reasserts and develops her thesis.

Although *Dr. Caligari* certainly responds to readings like this, which see the film as part of an expressionist aesthetic or a projection of the unconscious of the German masses around 1920, the more concrete social realities informing the film frequently get overlooked. In *The Weimar Republic Sourcebook*, Anton Kaes, Martin Jay, and Edward Dimendberg have assembled a compendium of documents on this period in German history, and many of the topics for this cultural history of Germany from 1918 to 1930 could act as a social blueprint for the thematic history that permeates *Dr. Caligari*. Three topics stand out as especially pertinent — the traumatic legacy of war (creating a fatherless generation), economic upheaval and social instabilities (that rattled almost every social institution at the time), and the rise of fascism (through repressive authority figures). With traces of each of these three motifs throughout the film, *Dr. Caligari* becomes, from one angle, a study of social violence within the interpersonal relationships and the cultural institutions of Weimar Germany.

The writer refines and focuses her thesis as three motifs in the film.

A strong topic sentence presents the first motif, supported by a secondary source.

At the heart of *Dr. Caligari* is a social melodrama concentrated on conscious sexual activities that quickly turn violent. According to Thomas Elsaesser, “It is essentially the tale of a suitor who is ignored or turned down” (184). The threesome at the center of the story — Francis, Alan, and Jane — suggests both male bonds and a heterosexual romance that moves toward the conventional outcome of marriage. However, like Jane’s anxious worry over “her father’s long absence,” each member of this standard social group seems physically and emotionally handicapped by a missing parental or patriarchal figure.

> An exact quotation from the film’s dialogue provides supporting evidence for the writer’s claim.

Essential to the plot is the rivalry that creates a tension among the three characters, with Alan and Francis competing for the affections of Jane. That seemingly normal and playful tension, however, turns dark when Cesare becomes a standin for the simmering violence implicit in this group, murdering Francis’s rival Alan and seducing and abducting Jane. In the midst of these events, the dazed Jane can only mutter that “we queens may never choose as our hearts dictate,” and Francis goes mad [**Figure CDC.3**]. If heterosexual melodramas take many forms through history and in different cultures, here a common love triangle suddenly and inexplicitly erupts with unusual violence, suggesting that the problem may be less about Caligari and Cesare than about the enormous social stress and strain within this fundamental social grouping.

CDC.3 ***The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*** (1920). A romance gone awry becomes a sign of simmering violence.

A smooth transition is made from the previous paragraph to the second motif about "social institutions," analyzed here as three different "social spaces."

The violent stress and strain of this heterosexual drama spreads and appears throughout every social institution in *Dr. Caligari*. The home is where the melodrama explodes, but the film identifies this violence with three other social spaces — the city government, the carnival, and the mental hospital. With the first, an officious town clerk is murdered on a whim for enforcing restrictions that annoy Dr. Caligari. With the second, entertainment turns ominously threatening when a sideshow amusement tells Alan, "You die at dawn." With the third, a traditional institution for healing becomes a prison to subjugate or control human beings who have lost all ability to interact socially. In each case — and most notably in the hospital, where the

narrative pretends to return to a normal world — the visual disturbances of the graphically twisted walls and out-of-kilter windows become a measure not merely of an unbalanced expressionistic mind but, more important, of the social violence that surrounds all individuals as part of the institutions in which they must live.

> Visual details strengthen the argument.
>
> The third motif builds on a more general secondary source on "screen violence."

Violence has always been an ingredient and attraction of films, and the brand of social violence in *Dr. Caligari* is linked to a specific time and place — a postwar Weimar Germany from which the Nazi regime would soon spring. In "Graphic Violence in the Cinema" from *Screening Violence*, Stephen Prince correctly argues that "screen violence is deeply embedded in the history and functioning of cinema" and the "appeal of violence in the cinema — for filmmakers and viewers — is tied to the medium's inherently visceral properties" (2).

Although Prince claims that "screen violence in earlier periods was generally more genteel and indirect" (2), there is nothing genteel about the social violence of *Dr. Caligari*, even if it lacks the physical excess of contemporary movies. With the crucial insights of historical hindsight, this violence should not be relegated merely to the unconscious and the psychological distortions of dark fantasies but should be recognized as the shadow of a historical and social reality. In its original historical context, the melodramatic violence in the relationship of Alan, Francis, and Jane maps a frustrating and often desperate problem with heterosexual romance in a fatherless Germany, while the troubled, anxious, and repressive interactions at town halls, carnivals, and hospitals refer to a real political and structural crisis in the social arenas of post–World War I Germany. If the social violence of *Dr. Caligari* seems tame (to modern eyes accustomed to Technicolor bloodbaths), there is no doubt that such violence reverberates with more extensive, if less intensive, implications for the state of German society in 1920.

Viewers without a deep understanding of German history and *Caligari*'s original cultural context can still appreciate its dark tale, striking visual effects, and unsettling frame tale. The psychological dimension that permeates this murder mystery is,

moreover, an undeniable and critical component to its disturbing plot and expressionistic mise-en-scène. Yet in the wake of World War I, the nightmarish violence of the film resonates with particular historical and social meanings that cannot be explained as fantasy. *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* will always be a specific cultural space whose violence remains historically tangible.

The assertive conclusion restates the central thesis.

Note

1. In *A History of Narrative Film*, David A. Cook notes that the great German director Fritz Lang urged this frame tale: “Lang correctly thought that the reality frame would heighten the expressionistic elements of the mise-en-scène” (110).

The Works Cited list starts on a new page at the end of the research essay.

Works Cited

Budd, Mike, ed. The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari: *Texts, Contexts, Histories*. Rutgers UP, 1990.

Cook, David A. *A History of Narrative Film.* 5th ed. Norton, 2016.

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The Works Consulted list, when included, starts on a new page following Works Cited.

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Chapter 12 Review

SUMMARY

- Good writing about film balances the writer's subjective opinions with **critical objectivity**, with facts and evidence to support the writer's evaluation.
- Two of the most common forms of writing about film are reviews and analytical essays.
  - A **film review** is a short essay aimed at a general audience. It provides plot and background information and gives a clear evaluation of the film.
  - An **analytical essay** typically focuses on particular themes, provides interpretations, and offers careful analysis of **evidence** in support of a central **thesis statement**.
    - Many writers first outline an analytical essay to help establish an organizational structure, including **topic sentences**.
- When preparing to write an analytical essay, you must first choose a topic. There are two broad sets of topics: formal topics and contextual topics.
  - *Formal topics* concentrate on the forms and ideas in a film, and include **character analysis, narrative analysis**, and **stylistic analysis**.

    - *Contextual topics* relate a film to other films or to surrounding issues, and include **comparative analysis** and **cultural analysis**.
- Often, writing about film involves conducting research to locate sources. There are two main types of sources: primary and secondary.
    - **Primary research sources** have a direct and close relationship with the original film. They include film scripts and actual films.
    - **Secondary research sources** are sources written or gathered by outside individuals, such as film critics or scholars. These sources include books, essays, and websites.
    - When you use sources in your essay, either in direct quotations or in paraphrases, you must document the sources both in the text of your essay and in a **Works Cited** section at the end of the essay.
        - Sometimes you might also include a **Works Consulted** section for works that influence your essay but are not directly quoted or paraphrased in the essay.
        - Modern Language Association (MLA) citation and documentation style is typically preferred.

KEY TERMS

critical objectivity
film review

analytical essay
character analysis
narrative analysis
stylistic analysis
comparative analysis
cultural analysis
evidence
thesis statement
topic sentence
primary research sources
secondary research sources
Works Cited
Works Consulted

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Glossary

above-the-line expenses:
A film's initial costs of contracting the major personnel, such as directors and stars, as well as administrative and organizational expenses in setting up a film production.

absolute film:
A film movement that focused on abstraction in motion in Germany in the 1920s.

abstract film:
A nonrepresentational experimental film.

academy ratio:
An aspect ratio of screen width to height of 1.37:1, the standard adopted by the Motion Picture Academy of Arts and Sciences in 1932 and used by most films until the introduction of widescreen in the 1950s; similar to the standard television ratio of 1.33:1 or 4:3.

activist video:
A confrontational political documentary that uses low-cost video equipment.

actor:
An individual who embodies and performs a film character through speech, gestures, and movements.

actualities:
Nonfiction films introduced in the 1890s depicting real people and events through continuous footage. A famous example is Louis and Auguste Lumière's *Workers Leaving the Lumière Factory* (1895).

adaptation:
The process of turning a book, television show, play, or other artistic work into a film.

affect:

The feelings, emotions, and sensations that arise in the viewer engaging with a film.

agent:
An individual who represents actors, directors, writers, and other major personnel employed by a film production by contacting and negotiating with writers, casting directors, and producers.

alternative film narrative:
Film narratives that deviate from or challenge the linearity of classical film narrative, often undermining the centrality of the main character, the continuity of the plot, or the verisimilitude of the narration.

analytical essay:
The most common kind of writing done by film students and scholars, distinguished by its intended audience and the level of its critical language.

analytic philosophy:
A branch of philosophy that emphasizes logical argument.

anamorphic lens:
A camera lens that compresses the horizontal axis of a widescreen image onto a strip of 35mm film or a projector lens that decompresses such an image.

ancillary market:
A venue other than theatrical release in which a film can make money, such as foreign sales, airlines, DVD, or on demand.

animated musical:
A subgenre of the musical that uses cartoon figures and stories to present songs and music.

animation:
The use of cinema technology to give the illusion of movement to individual drawings, paintings, figures, or computer-generated images. The process traditionally refers to drawing or painting on individual cels or to manipulating three-dimensional objects and then photographing the cels or objects onto single frames of film. Animation now encompasses digital imaging techniques.

anime:
Japanese animation, first launched following World War II.

antagonist:
A character who opposes the protagonist as a negative force in a film. See *protagonist*.

anthology films:
Films comprised of segments by different directors.

A picture:
A feature film with a large budget and prestigious source material or actors that has been historically promoted as a main attraction receiving top billing in a double feature. See *B picture*.

apparatus theory:
Jean-Louis Baudry's theory that ideological assumptions are reproduced through the impression of reality conveyed by film technology and the viewing situation itself.

apparent motion:
The psychological process that explains our perception of movement when watching films, in which the brain actively responds to the visual stimuli of a rapid sequence of still images exactly as it would in actual motion perception.

archetype:
A spiritual, psychological, or cultural model expressing certain virtues, values, or timeless realities.

art director:
The individual responsible for supervising the conception and construction of the physical environment in which the actors appear, including sets, locations, props, and costumes.

art film:
A film produced primarily for aesthetic rather than commercial or entertainment purposes, whose intellectual or formal challenges are often attributed to the vision of an auteur.

aspect ratio:
The width-to-height ratio of the film frame as it appears on a movie screen or television monitor.

asynchronous sound:
Sound that does not have a visible onscreen source; also referred to as *offscreen sound*.

augmented reality (AR):
An experience or environment that combines real objects with fabricated design elements, often computer-generated. AR experiences can include video and audio as well as touch and smell.

auteur:
The French term for "author"; the individual credited with the creative vision defining a film; implies a director whose unique style is apparent across his or her body of work. See also *auteur theory*.

auteur theory:
An approach to cinema first proposed in the French film journal *Cahiers du cinéma* that emphasizes the director as the expressive force behind a film and sees a director's body of work as united by common themes or formal strategies; also referred to as *auteurism*.

automated dialogue replacement (ADR):
A process during which actors watch the film footage and rerecord their lines to be dubbed into the soundtrack. See *looping*.

avant-garde films:
Aesthetically challenging, noncommercial films that experiment with film forms.

average shot length:
The average duration of time (usually measured in seconds) of individual shots in a particular movie.

axis of action:
An imaginary line bisecting a scene corresponding to the 180-degree rule in continuity editing.

backlighting:
A highlighting technique that illuminates the person or object from behind, tending to silhouette the subject; sometimes called *edgelighting*.

below-the-line expenses:
The technical and material costs — costumes, sets, transportation, and so on — involved in the actual making of a film.

benshi:
Storytellers who narrated and interpreted silent films in Japan.

blaxploitation:
A genre of low-budget films made in the early 1970s targeting urban, African American audiences and featuring streetwise African American protagonists. Several black directors made a creative mark in a genre that was primarily intended to make money for its producers.

block booking:
A practice in which movie theaters had to exhibit whatever a studio/distributor packaged with its more popular and desirable movies; declared an unfair business practice in 1948.

blockbuster:
A big-budget film, intended for wide release, whose large investment in stars, special effects, and advertising attracts large audiences and big profits.

blocking:
The arrangement and movement of actors in relation to one another within the physical space of the mise-en-scène.

Bollywood:
A commonly used name for the popular Hindi-language film industry based in Mumbai, India, sometimes used to refer to the entire Indian film industry, the world's largest.

boom:
A long pole used to hold a microphone above the actors to capture sound while remaining outside the frame, handled by a *boom operator*.

B picture:
A low-budget, nonprestigious movie that usually played on the bottom half of a double bill. B pictures were often produced by the smaller studios referred to as Hollywood's Poverty Row. See *A picture*.

British New Wave:
A movement of British films between 1959 and 1963 that focused on working-class realism, discontent, and rebellious youth.

camera height:
The level at which the camera is placed.

camera lens:
A piece of curved glass that focuses light rays in order to form an image on film.

camera movement:
See *mobile frame*.

camera operator:
A member of the film crew in charge of physically manipulating the camera, overseen by the cinematographer.

canon:
An accepted list of essential great works in a field of study.

canted frame:
Framing that is not level, creating an unbalanced appearance.

casting director:
The individual responsible for identifying and selecting which actors would work best in particular roles.

cels:
A transparent sheet of celluloid on which individual images are drawn or painted in traditional animation. These drawings are then photographed onto single frames of film.

character:

An individual who motivates the events and performs the actions of the story.

character actor:
A recognizable actor associated with particular character types, often humorous or sinister, and often cast in minor parts.

character analysis:
An argument focusing on a single character or on the interactions between two or more characters.

character coherence:
The consistency and coherence of a character.

character depth:
The pattern of psychological and social features that distinguish characters as rounded and complex in a way that approximates realistic human personalities.

character development:
The patterns through which characters in a film move from one mental, physical, or social state to another.

characters:
Individuals who motivate the events and perform the actions of the story.

character type:
A conventional character (such as a hard-boiled detective or femme fatale) typically portrayed by actors cast because of their physical features, their acting style, or the history of other roles they have played. See *stereotype*.

chiaroscuro lighting:
Dramatic, high-contrast lighting that emphasizes shadows and the contrast between light and dark; frequently used in German expressionist cinema and film noir.

chronology:
The order according to which shots or scenes convey the temporal sequence of the story's events.

chronophotography:

A sequence of still photographs that record incremental movement, such as those depicting human or animal motion produced by Eadweard Muybridge and Étienne-Jules Marey.

Cinema Novo:
A film movement (1960s–1970s) in Brazil that emphasized social equality and intellectualism and broke with studio gloss.

cinematographer:
The member of the film crew who selects the cameras, film stock, lighting, and lenses to be used as well as the camera setup or position; also known as the *director of photography* (D.P.).

cinematography:
Motion-picture photography, literally "writing in movement."

cinéma vérité:
A French term meaning "cinema truth"; a style of documentary filmmaking first practiced in France in the late 1950s and early 1960s that used unobtrusive, lightweight cameras and sound equipment to capture real-life situations. See *direct cinema* (the parallel U.S. movement).

cinephilia:
A love of cinema. A film lover is a *cinephile*.

clapperboard:
A slate that is marked to identify each scene and the take and is snapped to synchronize sound recordings and camera images.

classical film narrative:
A style of narrative filmmaking centered on one or more central characters who propel the plot with a cause-and-effect logic. Normally plots are developed with linear chronologies directed at definite goals, and the film employs an omniscient or a restricted third-person narration that suggests some degree of verisimilitude.

classical film theory:
Writings on the fundamental questions of cinema produced in the first half of the twentieth century. Important classical film theorists include Sergei Eisenstein,

Rudolf Arnheim, André Bazin, and Siegfried Kracauer.

classical Hollywood narrative:
The dominant form of classical film narrative associated with the Hollywood studio system from the end of the 1910s to the end of the 1950s.

claymation:
A process that uses stop-motion photography with clay figures to create the illusion of movement.

close-up:
Framing that shows details of a person or an object, such as a character's face.

code:
A term used in linguistics and semiotics for conventions governing a communication act. Senders and receivers must share a code for the message to be understood (for example, traffic signals use a color code). Film analysts isolate various codes (including codes of camera movement, framing, lighting, and acting) that determine the specific form of a particular shot, scene, film, or genre.

cognition:
The aspects of comprehension that make up our rational reactions and thought processes, also contributing to our pleasure in watching movies.

cognitivism:
An approach to film that draws on psychology and neuroscience to understand how the mind responds to narrative and aesthetic information.

color balance:
The adjustment of color intensity.

color correction:
In digital processing, adjusting a film's color levels and exposures for accuracy and consistency.

color filter:
A device fitted to the camera lens to change the tones of the filmed image.

color grading:

The process of altering the image after capture, either digitally or photochemically.

comedy:
A film genre that celebrates the harmony and resiliency of social life, typically with a narrative that ends happily and an emphasis on episodes or "gags" over plot continuity.

comparative analysis:
An analysis evaluating features or elements of two or more different films or perhaps a film and its literary source.

compilation films:
Films comprised of footage taken from different sources.

computer animation:
A digital version of traditional animation.

computer-generated imagery (CGI):
Still or animated images created through digital computer technology. First introduced in the 1970s, CGI was used to create feature-length films by the mid-1990s and is widely used for visual effects.

connotation:
The association connected with a word or sign. See *denotation*.

continuity editing:
Hollywood editing that uses cuts and other transitions to establish verisimilitude, to construct a coherent time and space, and to tell stories clearly and efficiently; sometimes called *invisible editing*. Continuity editing follows the basic principle that each shot has a continuous relationship to the next shot.

continuity style:
An approach to filmmaking associated with classical Hollywood cinema that uses a broad array of technical choices (from continuity editing to scoring) that efface technique in order to emphasize human agency and narrative clarity.

contrapuntal sound:

Sound that is unexpected considering the image that is displayed onscreen.

costume designer:
An individual who plans and prepares how actors will be dressed for parts.

counter cinema:
Films made in opposition to mainstream cinema, especially in the 1960s and 1970s.

counterpoint:
Using sound to indicate a different meaning or association than the image.

coverage:
Filming many takes, often using different setups, in order to have options during editing.

crane shot:
A shot taken from a camera mounted on a crane that can vary in distance, height, and angle.

credits:
A list of all the personnel involved in a film production, including cast, crew, and executives.

crime film:
A film genre that typically features criminals and individuals dedicated to crime detection and plots that involve criminal acts.

critical objectivity:
Writing with a detached response that offers judgments based on facts and evidence with which others would or could agree.

crosscutting:
An editing technique that cuts back and forth between actions in separate spaces, often implying simultaneity. See *parallel editing*.

cue:
A visual or aural signal that indicates the beginning of an action, a line of dialogue, or a piece of music.

cultural analysis:
An interpretation of the relationship of a film to its place in history, society, or culture.

cultural studies:
A set of approaches drawn from the humanities and social sciences that considers cultural phenomena like film in conjunction with processes of production and consumption and aspects of everyday life.

cut:
In the editing process, the join or splice between two pieces of film; in the finished film, an editing transition between two separate shots or scenes achieved without optical effects. Also used to describe a version of the edited film, as in *rough cut* or *director's cut*. See *final cut*.

cutaway:
A shot that interrupts an action to "cut away" to another image or action, often to abridge time, before returning to the first shot or scene at a point further along in time.

Czech New Wave:
A film movement that came to prominence in 1960s Czechoslovakia and used absurdist humor, nonprofessional actors, and improvised dialogue to express political dissent. It ended with the Soviet invasion in 1969.

dailies:
The footage shot on a single day of filming.

day-and-date release:
A simultaneous release strategy across different media and venues, such as a theatrical release and a DVD release.

deadline structure:
A narrative structured around a central event or action that must be accomplished by a certain time.

deep focus:

A camera technique using a large depth of field in which multiple planes in the shot are all in focus simultaneously, usually with a special lens. See *wide-angle lens*.

denotation:
The literal meaning of a word. See *connotation*.

depth of field:
The range or distance before and behind the main focus of a shot within which objects remain relatively sharp and clear.

detective film:
A genre of the crime film focusing on a protagonist who represents the law or an ambiguous version of it, such as a private investigator.

dialectical montage:
Sergei Eisenstein's term for the cutting together of conflicting or unrelated images to generate an idea or emotion in the viewer.

diegesis:
The world of the film's story (its characters, places, and events), including what is shown and what is implied to have taken place. It comes from the Greek word meaning "narration." See *mimesis*.

diegetic sound:
Sound that has its source in the narrative world of the film, whose characters are presumed to be able to hear it.

digital cinema package (DCP):
A collection of digital files that stores and projects audio, image, and data streams.

digital cinematography:
Shooting with a camera that records and stores visual information electronically as digital code.

digital compositing:
The process of digitally combining images to make a final image.

digital intermediate (DI):
A digitized version of a film that allows it to be manipulated.

digital sound:
Recording and reproducing sound through technologies that encode and decode it as digital information.

direct cinema:
A documentary style originating in the United States in the 1960s that aims to observe an unfolding situation as unobtrusively as possible; related to *cinéma vérité*.

directional lighting:
Lighting coming from a single direction.

director:
The chief creative presence or the primary manager in film production, responsible for overseeing virtually all the work of making a movie.

direct sound:
Sound captured directly from its source. See *reflected sound*.

disability studies:
The academic discipline focusing on the meaning, nature, and consequence of disability in society.

disjunctive editing:
Editing practices that call attention to the cut through spatial tension, temporal jumps, or rhythmic or graphic patterns.

dissolve:
An optical effect that briefly superimposes one shot over the next, which takes its place: one image fades out as another image fades in.

distanciation:
Derived from the work and theories of Bertolt Brecht, an artistic practice intended to create an intellectual distance between the viewer and work of art in order to reflect on the work's production or the various ideas and issues that it raises.

distribution:
The means through which a distributor delivers movies to theaters, video stores, television and internet networks, and other venues.

distributor:
A company or an agency that acquires the rights to a movie from the filmmakers or producers (sometimes by contributing to the costs of producing the film) and makes the movie available to audiences by renting, selling, or licensing it to theaters or other exhibition outlets.

documentary:
A nonfiction film that presents real objects, people, and events.

documentary animation:
Animation that tells true stories with enhanced moving images.

dolly shot:
A shot in which the camera is moved on a wheeled dolly that follows a determined course.

dolly zoom:
A shot in which the camera is moved to keep the object the same size.

early cinema:
The period of rapid change in how films were made and seen that stretches from 1895 to the rise of the feature film form in around 1915.

editing:
The process of selecting and joining film footage and shots into a finished film with a distinctive style and rhythm. The individual responsible for this process is the *editor*.

ellipsis:
An abridgment in time in the narrative implied by editing.

epic western:
A subgenre of the western concentrating on action and movement and developing a heroic character whose quests and battles serve to define the nation and its

origins.

establishing shot:
An initial long shot that establishes the location and setting and that orients the viewer in space to a clear view of the action.

ethnographic documentaries:
Films that record the practices, rituals, and people of a culture.

evidence:
Concrete details that convince readers of the validity of a writer's interpretation.

exclusive release:
A movie that premieres in restricted locations initially.

executive producer:
A producer who finances or facilitates a film deal and who usually has little creative or technical involvement.

exhibition:
The part of the film industry that shows films to a paying public, usually in movie theaters. See *exhibitor*.

exhibitor:
The owner of individual theaters or theater chains who makes decisions about programming and local promotion. See *exhibition*.

existential western:
A subgenre of the western whose introspective hero is troubled by his changing social status and his self-doubts, often as the frontier becomes more populated and civilized.

expanded cinema:
Installation or performance-based experimental film practices.

experimental film:
A film that makes expressive use of film form.

experimental media:

Media that makes expressive use of media affordances.

exploitation film:
A cheaply made genre film that exploits sensational or topical subject matter or genre conventions for profit.

extra:
An actor without speaking parts who appears in the background and in crowd scenes.

extreme close-up:
A shot that is framed comparatively tighter than a close-up, singling out, for instance, a person's eyes.

extreme long shot:
A shot framed from a comparatively greater distance than a long shot, in which the surrounding space dominates human figures.

eyeline match:
A cut that follows a shot of a character looking offscreen with a shot of a subject whose screen position matches the gaze of the character in the first shot.

fade-in:
An optical effect in which a black screen gradually brightens to a full picture; often used after a fade-out to create a transition between scenes. See *fade-out*.

fade-out:
An optical effect in which an image gradually darkens to black, often ending a scene or a film. See *fade-in*.

family melodrama:
A subgenre of the melodrama that focuses on the psychological and gendered forces restricting individuals within the family.

fast motion:
A special effect that makes the action move at faster-than-normal speeds, achieved by filming the action at a slow speed and then projecting it at standard speeds. See *slow motion*.

feature film:
Running typically ninety to 120 minutes in length, a narrative film that is the primary attraction for audiences.

fill lighting:
A lighting technique using secondary fill lights to balance the key lighting by removing shadows or to emphasize other spaces and objects in the scene.

film culture:
The practices, institutions, and communities surrounding film production, publicity, and appreciation that shape our expectations, ideas, and understanding of movies.

film gauge:
The width of the film stock — such as 8mm, 16mm, 35mm, and 70mm.

film noir:
The French term for "black film"; a style of Hollywood films of the 1940s and 1950s, generally shot using stylized black and white cinematography in nighttime urban settings and featuring morally ambiguous protagonists, corrupt institutions, dangerous women, and convoluted plots.

film review:
A short essay that describes the plot of a movie, provides useful background information, and pronounces a clear evaluation of the film to guide its readers.

film shoot:
The weeks or months of actual shooting, on set or on location.

film speed:
The rate at which moving images are recorded and later projected, standardized for 35mm sound film at 24 frames per second (fps); also a measure of film stock's sensitivity to light.

film stock:
Unexposed film consisting of a flexible backing or base and a light-sensitive emulsion.

film studies:
A discipline that reflects critically on the nature and history of movies and the place of film in culture.

film theory:
Sustained reflection on the form, function, value, or significance of film as medium, institution, or social practice.

filters:
Transparent sheets of glass or gels placed in front of the lens to create various effects.

final cut:
The final edited version of a film. See *cut*.

first-person narration:
Narration that is identified with a single individual, usually a character in the film.

first-run theater:
A theater that shows recently released movies.

flare:
A spot or flash of white light created by directing strong light directly at the lens.

flashback:
A sequence that follows an image set in the present with an image set in the past.

flashforward:
A sequence that connects an image set in the present with one or more future images.

focal length:
The distance from the center of the lens to the point where light rays meet in sharp focus.

focus:
The point or area in the image toward which the viewer's attention is directed; the point at which light rays refracted through the lens converge.

foley artist:
A member of the sound crew who generates live synchronized sound effects while watching the projected film; named after the inventor, Jack Foley.

following shots:
A pan, tilt, or tracking shot that follows a moving individual or object.

forced perspective:
An optical effect produced in-camera by positioning the camera to create illusions of scale.

formalism:
A critical approach to cinema that emphasizes formal properties of the text or medium over content or context.

found footage:
Audiovisual material used outside its original context.

frame:
A still image from a movie.

framing:
The portion of the filmed subject that appears within the borders of the frame. It correlates with camera distance — such as long shot or medium close-up.

French impressionist cinema:
A 1920s avant-garde film movement that aimed to destabilize familiar or objective ways of seeing and to revitalize the dynamics of human perception.

French New Wave:
A film movement that came to prominence in the late 1950s and 1960s in France in opposition to the conventional studio system. The films were often made with low budgets and young actors, were shot on location, used unconventional sound and editing patterns, and addressed the struggle for personal expression. Also called *Nouvelle Vague*.

frontal lighting:
Techniques used to illuminate the subject from the front.

gangster films:
A genre of the crime film about the world of organized crime and its violent criminals. An early cycle was set in the United States during Prohibition in the 1930s.

generic reflexivity:
The quality of movies displaying unusual self-consciousness about generic identity.

genre:
A category or classification of films that share similar subject matter, settings, iconography, and narrative and stylistic patterns.

genre criticism:
An analytical approach that considers a film in relation to the properties or effects of particular genres or classifications, for example, comedy or horror.

German expressionist cinema:
A German film movement (1918–1929) that veered away from the movies' realism by representing irrational forces through lighting, sets, and costume design. Expressionism (in film, theater, painting, and other arts) turned away from realist representation and toward the unconscious and irrational sides of human experience.

graphic match:
An edit in which a dominant shape or line in one shot provides a visual transition to a similar shape or line in the next shot.

green-screen technology:
A technique for creating visual effects in which actors, objects, or figures are filmed in front of a green screen and later superimposed onto a computer-generated or filmed background. See *computer-generated imagery (CGI)*.

grip:
A crew member who installs lighting and dollies.

handheld camera:

A lightweight camera that can be carried by the operator rather than mounted on a tripod. Small-gauge handheld formats like 8mm and 16mm, as well as many digital cameras, allow for greater mobility, lower production costs, and encourage location shooting.

handheld shot:
An often unsteady film image produced by an individual carrying the camera.

hard lighting:
A high-contrast lighting style that creates hard edges, distinctive shadows, and a harsh effect, especially when filming people.

Heimat films:
Films set in idyllic countryside locales of Germany and Austria that depict a world of traditional folk values.

high angle:
A shot directed at a downward angle on individuals or a scene.

high concept:
A short phrase that attempts to sell a movie by identifying its main marketing features, such as its stars, genre, or some other easily identifiable connection.

high-key lighting:
Lighting where the main source of light creates little contrast between light and dark.

highlighting:
The use of different lighting sources to emphasize certain characters or objects.

historical documentary:
A type of documentary that concentrates largely on recovering and representing events or figures in history.

historiography:
The writing of history; the study of the methods and principles through which the past is viewed according to certain perspectives and priorities.

horror film:

A film genre with origins in Gothic literature that seeks to frighten the viewer though supernatural or predator characters.

hue:
Color discerned by detecting light of a particular wavelength.

hybrid genres:
Mixed forms created through the interaction of different genres to produce fusions, such as musical horror films.

icon:
In semiotics, a sign that that refers to its referent through resemblance, an image.

iconography:
Images or image patterns with specific connotations or meanings.

identification:
The complex process through which we empathize with or project feeling onto a character or an action.

ideology:
A systematic set of beliefs that are not necessarily conscious or acknowledged.

IMAX:
A large-format film system that is projected horizontally rather than vertically to produce an image approximately ten times larger than the standard 35mm frame.

independent films:
Films that are produced without initial studio funding. They include low-budget feature-length theatrical narratives as well as nontheatrical documentaries and shorts.

index:
A sign that refers to its referent through a direct causal relationship, like a fingerprint.

insert:
A brief shot, often a close-up, that points out details significant to the action or interpretation.

integrated musical:
A subgenre of the musical that integrates musical numbers into the film's narrative, rather than setting them off as performances.

intensity:
Brightness or dullness of color.

intercutting:
Interposing shots of two or more actions or locations.

interpretive community:
Members of an audience who share particular knowledge, or cultural competence, through which a film is experienced and interpreted.

intertextuality:
A critical approach that holds that a text depends on other, related texts for its full meaning.

intertitle:
Printed text inserted between film images, typically used in silent films to indicate dialogue and exposition and in contemporary films to indicate time and place or other transitions.

invisible editing:
See *continuity editing*.

iris:
A shot in which the corners of the frame are masked in a black, usually circular, form. An *iris-out* is a transition that gradually obscures the image by moving in; an *iris-in* expands to reveal the entire image.

Italian neorealism:
A film movement that began in Italy during World War II and lasted until approximately 1952, depicting everyday social realities using location shooting and amateur actors, in opposition to glossy studio formulas.

***jidai-geki* films:**

Period films or costume dramas set before 1868, when feudal Japan entered the modern Meiji period.

jump cut:
An edit that interrupts a particular action and intentionally or unintentionally creates discontinuities in the spatial or temporal development of shots.

keyframes:
In animation, the images or points on a time line that mark the beginning or end of a transition.

key light:
The main source of nonnatural lighting in a scene. See *high-key lighting* and *low-key lighting*.

leading actors:
The two or three actors, often stars, who represent the central characters in a narrative.

lead room:
The space in front and in the direction of an object being filmed.

letterbox:
An effect, usually seen on home video or television, where the top and bottom strips of a frame are blacked out to accommodate a widescreen image.

lighting:
Sources of illumination — both natural light and electrical lamps — used to present, shade, and accentuate figures, objects, and spaces in the mise-en-scène. Lighting is primarily the responsibility of the director of photography and the lighting crew. See *key lighting, fill lighting* , and *highlighting*.

limited release:
The practice of initially distributing a film only to major cities and expanding distribution according to its success or failure.

linear chronology:
The arrangement of plot events and actions that follow one another in time.

line producer:
The individual in charge of the daily business of tracking costs and maintaining the production schedule of a film.

live-action movie:
A film that uses photographic images.

location scout:
An individual who determines and secures places that provide the most suitable environment for shooting different movie scenes.

long shot:
A shot that places considerable distance between the camera and the scene, object, or person being filmed so that the object or person is recognizable but defined by the large space and background. See *establishing shot*.

long take:
A shot of relatively long duration.

looping:
Recording an image or sound on a loop of film to be replayed or to replace previously recorded dialogue.

low angle:
A shot from a position lower than its subject.

low-key lighting:
Lighting where the main source of light creates a stark contrast between light and dark.

machinima:
A new media form that modifies video game engines to create computer animation.

magic lantern:
A device developed in the seventeenth century for using a lens and a light source to project an image from a slide; a precursor of motion pictures.

marketing:

The process of identifying an audience and bringing a product such as a movie to its attention for consumption.

masks:
Attachments to the camera or devices added optically that cut off portions of the frame so that part of the image is black.

master shot:
A single shot recording an entire scene from start to finish from an angle and distance that keep everything in view. It is used for *coverage* during the editing process.

match on action:
A cut between two shots continuing a visual action.

matte shot:
A process shot that joins two pieces of film, one with the central action or object and the other with a painted or digitally produced background that would be difficult to create physically for the shot.

mechanical effects:
Techniques that are produced on set — often with sets, props, costumes, and make-up — and that include pyrotechnics, weather effects, and scaled models.

media convergence:
The process by which formerly distinct media (such as cinema, television, the internet, and video games) and viewing platforms (such as television, computers, and cell phones) become interdependent.

medium close-up:
A shot that frames a person from the shoulders up; typically used during conversation sequences.

medium long shot:
A shot that increases the distance between the camera and the subject compared with a medium shot; shows most of an individual's body.

medium shot:

A middle-ground framing in which we see the body of a person from approximately the waist up.

medium specificity:
A theory that says that a successful artwork fulfills the promise of its medium's unique physical properties.

melodrama:
A sensational narrative mode with clearly identifiable moral types, coincidences, and reversals of fortune, and music (*melos*) that underscores the action.

message:
In semiotics, that which is communicated between sender and receiver according to a shared *code.*

metteur-en-scène:
French term for "director" (particularly a theater director); in auteur theory, a director who conveys technical competence without a strong streak of individual vision, in contrast to an auteur. See *auteur*.

mickey-mousing:
Overillustrating the action through the musical score, drawn from the conventions of composing for cartoons.

mimesis:
Imitation of reality in the arts. See *diegesis*.

miniature:
A small-scale model constructed for use during the filming process to stage special-effects sequences and complex backgrounds.

minor character:
A character who surrounds, contrasts with, and supports a film's protagonists and antagonists and who usually is associated with specific character groups. Also called *secondary character*.

mise-en-scène:

All the elements of a movie scene that are organized, often by the director, to be filmed and that are later visible onscreen; includes actors, lighting, sets, costumes, make-up, and other features of the image that exist independently of the camera and the processes of filming and editing.

mix:
The combination by the sound mixer of separate soundtracks into a single master track that will be transferred onto the film print together with the image track to which it is synchronized.

mobile frame:
A property of a shot in which the camera moves or the borders of the image are altered by a change in the focal length of the camera lens to follow an action or explore a space.

mockumentary:
A film that uses a documentary style and structure to present and stage fictional (sometimes ludicrous) subjects.

modernism:
An artistic movement in painting, music, design, architecture, and literature beginning in the 1920s that rendered a fragmented vision of human subjectivity through strategies such as the foregrounding of style, experiments with space and time, and open-ended narratives.

modernity:
A term designating the period of history stretching from the end of the medieval era to the present, as well as the period's attitude of confidence in progress and science centered on the human capacity to shape history.

montage:
A term for editing most frequently used for a style that emphasizes the dynamic relationship between images, following Soviet silent-era filmmakers' use of the term; also designates rapid sequences in Hollywood films used for descriptive purposes or to show the rapid passage of time.

montage sequence:

A series of thematically linked shots or shots meant to show the passage of time, joined by quick cuts or other devices, such as dissolves, wipes, and superimpositions.

motion-capture technology:
A visual-effects technology used to incorporate an actor's movements into those of a computer-generated character. See *computer-generated imagery (CGI)*.

movement image:
Philosopher Gilles Deleuze's term for filmmaking that reflects a cause-and-effect view of time.

movie palaces:
Lavish movie theaters built between the 1920s and 1940s with ornate architecture and sumptuous seating for thousands.

multiplane camera:
In traditional animation, a camera that moves multiple images in front of the lens at different speeds and depths.

multiple narration:
Several different narrative perspectives for a single story or for different stories in a movie that loosely fit together.

multiplex:
A movie theater complex with many screens. Initially found in suburbs and connected to malls, they are now common in cities.

musical:
A genre popular since the introduction of synchronous sound that features characters who act out and express their emotions through song and dance.

music supervisor:
The individual who selects and secures the rights for songs to be used in films.

narration:
The telling of a story or description of a situation; the emotional, physical, or intellectual perspective through which the characters, events, and action of the

plot are conveyed. In film, narration is most explicit when provided as asynchronous verbal commentary on the action or images, but it can also designate the storytelling function of the camera, the editing, and verbal and other soundtracks.

narrative:
A story with a particular plot and point of view told by a narrator or conveyed by a narrational point of view. See *plot* and *story*.

narrative analysis:
A critical approach that concentrates on the story and its construction.

narrative cueing:
The ways that sound tells viewers what is happening in the plot.

narrative duration:
The length of time used to present an event or action in a plot.

narrative frame:
A context or person positioned outside the principal narrative of a film, such as bracketing scenes in which a character in the story's present begins to relate events of the past and later concludes her or his tale.

narrative frequency:
The number of times a plot element is repeated throughout a narrative.

narratology:
The study of narrative forms. Russian narratology introduced the distinction between the terms *fabula* (story), all the events included in a tale or imagined by the reader or viewer in the order in which they are assumed to have occurred, and *syuzhet* (plot), the ordering of narrative events in the particular narrative.

narrator:
A character or other person whose voice and perspective describe the action of a film, either in voiceover or through a particular point of view.

native aspect ratio:

The original size and shape of a frame shot by the filmmaker, sometimes altered for presentation on other platforms.

natural lighting:
Light derived from a natural source in a scene or setting, such as the illumination of the sun or firelight.

New German Cinema:
A film movement launched in West Germany in 1962 by a group of young filmmakers known for their confrontation with Germany's Nazi and postwar past.

new media:
Technologies that include the internet, digital technologies, video game consoles, cell phones, and wireless devices and the software applications and imaginative creations they support.

nickelodeons:
Storefront theaters and arcade spaces where short films were shown continuously for a five-cent admission price to audiences passing in and out. They were prominent until the rise of the feature film in the 1910s.

nitrate:
The highly flammable chemical base of 35mm film stock in use until the early 1950s.

Nollywood:
The contemporary Nigerian film industry.

nondiegetic insert:
An insert that depicts an action, an object, or a title originating outside the space and time of the narrative world.

nondiegetic sound:
Sound (such as a musical score) that does not have an identifiable source in the characters' world. See *diegetic sound* and *semidiegetic sound*.

nonfiction films:

Films presenting factual descriptions of actual events, persons, or places, rather than their fictional or invented re-creation.

non-narrative films:
Films organized in a variety of ways besides storytelling.

objective point of view:
A point of view that does not associate the perspective of the camera with that of a specific character.

offscreen space:
The implied space or world that exists outside the film frame.

omniscient narration:
Narration that presents all elements of the plot, exceeding the perspective of any one character. See *third-person narration*.

180-degree rule:
A central convention of continuity editing that restricts possible camera setups to the 180-degree area on one side of an imaginary line (the axis of action) drawn between the characters or figures of a scene. If the camera were to cross the line to film from within the 180-degree field on the other side, onscreen figure positions would be reversed.

onscreen space:
The space visible within the frame of the image.

ontology:
The branch of philosophy that deals with nature of being.

oppositional gaze:
bell hooks's concept of a perspective on dominant media formed from a viewer's experience of social marginalization.

optical effects:
Special effects produced with the use of an optical printer, including visual transitions between shots such as dissolves, fade-outs, and wipes, or process shots that combine figures and backgrounds through the use of matte shots.

optical sound recording:
The process that converts sound waves into electrical impulses (which then control how a light beam is projected onto film) and that enables a soundtrack to be recorded alongside the image for simultaneous projection.

orphan films:
Films that do not have copyright holders, including amateur films, training films, documentaries, censored materials, commercials, and newsreels.

overhead shot:
A shot that depicts the action from above, generally looking directly down on the subject from a crane, helicopter, or drone.

overlapping dialogue:
Mixing characters' speech to imitate the rhythm of speech; also may refer to dialogue that overlaps two scenes to effect a transition between them.

overlapping editing:
An edited sequence that presents two or more shots of the same action across several cuts.

over-the-shoulder shots:
Frame compositions where the camera is positioned slightly behind and over the shoulder of one character, focusing on another character or object; often used when alternating between speaking characters.

pace:
The tempo at which the film seems to move, influenced by the duration of individual shots and the style of editing.

package-unit approach:
An approach to film production established in the mid-1950s whereby the agent, producer, and casting director assembled a script, stars, and other major personnel as a key first step in a major production.

pan:
A left or right rotation of the camera, whose tripod or mount remains in a fixed position; produces a horizontal movement onscreen.

pan-and-scan process:
The process used to transfer a widescreen-format film to the 4:3 television aspect ratio. A computer-controlled scanner determines the most important action in the image and then crops peripheral action and space or presents the original frame as two separate images.

panchromatic stock:
A film stock that responds to a full spectrum of colors, rendering them as shades of gray, and became the standard for black-and-white movies after 1926.

parallel editing:
An editing technique that alternates back and forth between actions in separate locations, often implying simultaneity. See *crosscutting*.

parallel sound:
Sound that reinforces the image, such as synchronized dialogue or sound effects or a voiceover that is consistent with what is displayed onscreen. See *counterpoint*.

performance:
An actor's use of language, physical expression, and gesture to bring a character to life and to communicate important dimensions of that character to the audience.

performance-capture technology:
A technique for generating computer models from data gathered from an actor's performance.

periodization:
A method of organizing film history by groups of years that are defined by historical events or that produced movies that share thematic and stylistic concerns.

personal or subjective documentaries:
Documentary formats that emphasize the personal perspective or involvement of the filmmaker, often making the films resemble autobiographies or diaries.

perspective:
The manner in which the distance and spatial relationships among objects are represented on a two-dimensional surface. In painting, parallel and converging

lines give the illusion of distance and depth; in film, perspective can also be manipulated by changes in the focal length of camera lenses.

phenomenology:
A theory that any act of perception involves a mutuality of the viewer and what is viewed.

photogénie:
A term, coined by Louis Delluc, referring to a particular quality that distinguishes the filmed object from its everyday reality.

photorealism:
In animation, the attempt to replicate the look of live-action footage.

physical horror films:
A subgenre of the horror film in which the psychology of the characters takes second place to the depiction of graphic violence.

physical melodrama:
A subgenre of the melodrama that focuses on the material conditions that control the protagonist's desires and emotions.

piracy:
The unauthorized duplication and circulation of copyrighted material.

pixilation:
A type of animation that employs stop-motion photography to transform movement into rapid jerky gestures; the disintegration of the electronic image.

platforming:
The distribution strategy of releasing a film in gradually widening markets to build its reputation through reviews and word of mouth.

plot:
The narrative ordering of the events of the story as they appear in the actual work, selected and arranged according to particular temporal, spatial, generic, causal, or other patterns; in narratology, also known by the Russian word *syuzhet*.

plot time:

The length of time a movie depicts when telling its story. See *narrative duration*.

poetic realism:
A film movement in 1930s France that incorporated a lyrical style and a fatalistic view of life.

point of view:
The position from which a person, an event, or an object is seen or filmed; in narrative form, the perspective through which events are narrated.

point-of-view (POV) shot:
A subjective shot that reproduces a character's optical point of view, often preceded or followed by shots of the character looking.

postclassical narrative:
The form and content of films after the decline of the Hollywood studio system around 1960, including formerly taboo subject matter and narratives and formal techniques influenced by European cinema.

postmodernism:
An artistic style in architecture, art, literature, music, and film that incorporates fragments of or references to other styles; or the cultural period in which political, cultural, and economic shifts engendered challenges to the tenets of modernism, including its belief in the possibility of critiquing the world through art, the division of high and low culture, and the genius and independent identity of the artist.

postproduction:
The period in the filmmaking process that occurs after principal photography has been completed; usually consists of editing, sound, and visual-effects work.

postproduction sound:
Sound recorded and added to a film in the postproduction phase.

poststructuralism:
An intellectual development that challenged the methodology and fixed definitions of structuralism by emphasizing the place of subjectivity, the unreliability of language, and the construction of social power.

postsynchronous sound:
Sound recorded after the actual filming and then synchronized with onscreen sources.

premiere:
A red carpet event celebrating the opening night of a film.

preproduction:
The phase when a film project is in development, involving preparing the script, financing the project, casting, hiring crew, and securing locations.

prerecorded music:
Previously recorded music that is added to a film's soundtrack.

primary research sources:
Original sources in formats such as 16mm films, videotapes, DVDs, and film scripts; documents from the time of the film's production; and new research data.

principal photography:
The majority of footage filmed for a project during the shoot.

process shot:
A special effect that combines two or more images as a single shot, such as filming an actor in front of a projected background.

producer:
The person or persons who oversee each step of a film project, especially the financial aspects, from development to postproduction and a distribution deal.

production:
The industrial stages that contribute to the making of a finished movie, from the financing and scripting of a film to its final edit; more specifically, the actual shooting of a film after preproduction and before postproduction.

production designer:
The person in charge of the film's overall look.

production sound mixer:
The sound engineer on the production set; also called a *sound recordist*.

production values:
An evaluative term about the quality of the film images and sounds that reflects the investment expenses.

promotion:
The aspect of the movie industry through which audiences are exposed to and encouraged to see a particular film. Promotion includes advertisements, trailers, publicity appearances, and product tie-ins.

prop:
An object that functions as a part of the set or as a tool used by the actors.

propaganda films:
Political documentaries that visibly support and intend to sway viewers toward a particular social or political issue or group.

prosthetics:
Artificial facial features or body parts used to alter actors' appearances.

protagonist:
A character identified as the positive force in a film. See *antagonist*.

psychoanalysis:
The therapeutic method innovated by Sigmund Freud based on his attribution of unconscious motives to human actions, desires, and symptoms; theoretical tenets developed by literary and film critics to facilitate the cultural study of texts and the interaction between viewers and texts.

psychological horror film:
A subgenre of the horror film that locates the dangers that threaten normal life in the minds of bizarre and deranged individuals.

race movies:
Early twentieth-century films that featured all–African American casts and were circulated to African American audiences in the North and South.

rack focus (or pulled focus):
A dramatic change in focus from one object to another.

reaction shot:
A shot that depicts a character's response to something shown in a previous shot.

realism:
An artwork's quality of conveying a truthful picture of a society, person, or some other dimension of everyday life; an artistic movement that aims to achieve verisimilitude.

rear projection:
A technique that projects an image onto a screen behind the actors.

reception:
The process through which individual viewers or groups make sense of a film.

reception theory:
A theoretical approach to the ways different kinds of audiences regard different kinds of films.

reenactment:
A re-creation of presumably real events within the context of a documentary.

reestablishing shot:
A shot that reestablishes the space in which an edited sequence unfolds, orienting the spectator to changes in figure location and restoring an objective view of the action.

referent:
In semiotics, the object to which a sign refers.

reflected sound:
Recorded sound that is captured as it bounces from the walls and sets. It is usually used to give a sense of space. See *direct sound*.

reflexive narration:
A mode of narration that calls attention to the narrative point of view of the story in order to complicate or subvert its own narrative authority as an objective perspective on the world.

reflexivity:

Referencing the film's own process of storytelling or cinematic technique.

reframing:
The process of moving the frame from one position to another within a single continuous shot.

restricted narration:
A narrative in which our knowledge is limited to that of a particular character.

revisionist westerns:
Films that call into question the underlying values and conventions of the western genre.

rhythmic editing:
The organization of editing according to different paces or tempos determined by how quickly cuts are made.

road movie:
A film genre that depicts characters on a journey, usually following a linear chronology.

romantic comedy:
A subgenre of comedy in which humor takes second place to the happy ending, typically focusing on the emotional attraction of a couple in a lighthearted way.

room tone:
The aural properties of a location that are recorded and then mixed in with dialogue and other tracks to achieve a more realistic sound.

rotoscoping:
A technique using recorded real figures and action on video as a basis for painting individual animation frames digitally.

rule of thirds:
A technique that imagines the frame divided horizontally and vertically into thirds and places objects along these lines for maximum visual interest.

safety film:

Acetate-based film stock that replaced the highly flammable nitrate film base in the early 1950s.

saturation booking:
The distribution strategy of releasing a film simultaneously in as many locations as possible, widely implemented with the advent of the blockbuster in the 1970s. Also called *saturated release*.

scale:
The relative size of the image within the frame.

scene:
One or more shots that depict a continuous space and time.

scenic realism:
The physical, cultural, and historical accuracy of the background, objects, and other figures in a film.

scenics:
Early nonfiction films that offered exotic or remarkable images of nature or foreign lands.

score:
Music composed to accompany a completed film.

screenplay:
The text from which a movie is made, including dialogue and information about action, settings, shots, and transitions; developed from a treatment; also known as a *script*.

screen time:
The actual length of time that a movie takes to unfold.

screenwriter:
A writer of a film's screenplay; also called a *scriptwriter*. The screenwriter may begin with an original treatment and develop the plot structure and dialogue over the span of several versions.

screwball comedy:
A comic subgenre of the 1930s and 1940s known for fast talking and unpredictable action.

script:
A blueprint for the story of a film that includes scene descriptions, dialogue, and other directions. See *screenplay.*

script doctor:
An uncredited individual called in to do rewrites on a screenplay.

secondary research sources:
Books and articles conveying information about or interpreting a research topic. They may draw upon *primary research sources.*

segmentation:
The process of dividing a film into large narrative units for the purposes of analysis.

selects:
The director's chosen takes to use in editing a scene.

semidiegetic sound:
Sound that is neither strictly diegetic nor nondiegetic, such as certain voiceovers that can be construed as the thoughts of a character and thus as arising from the story world; also called *internal diegetic sound*.

semiotics:
The study of signs and signification; also called *semiology*. Semiotics posits that meaning is constructed and communicated through the selection, ordering, and interpretation of signs and sign systems, including words, gestures, images, symbols, or virtually anything that can be meaningfully codified.

sequence:
Any number of shots or scenes that are unified as a coherent action or an identifiable motif, regardless of changes in space and time.

sequence shot:

A shot in which an entire scene is played out in one continuous take.

set:
A constructed setting, often on a studio soundstage, on which filming takes place; can combine natural and constructed elements.

set decorator:
The member of the art department who places props and furnishing on set.

set lighting:
The distribution of an evenly diffused illumination through a scene as a kind of lighting base.

setting:
A fictional or real place where the action and events of the film occur.

shallow focus:
A shot in which only a narrow range of the field is in focus.

shock cut:
A cut that juxtaposes two images whose dramatic difference creates a jarring visual effect.

shooting ratio:
The relationship between the overall amount or length of film shot and the amount used in the finished project.

shot:
A continuous point of view (or continuously exposed piece of film) between two edits.

shot/reverse shot:
An editing pattern that begins with a shot of one character looking offscreen in one direction, followed by a shot of a second character, who appears to be looking back; also called *shot/countershot*. The first shot is taken from an angle at one end of the axis of action, the second from the "reverse" angle at the other end of the line; often used in conversations.

sidelighting:

Used to illuminate the subject from the side.

sign:
A term used in semiotics for something that signifies something else, whether the connection is causal, conventional, or based on resemblance. As defined by Ferdinand de Saussure, a sign is composed of a signifier and a signified.

signified:
The mental concept evoked by a *signifier*.

signifier:
A spoken or written word, picture, or gesture.

simulacrum:
An imitation; in the work of Jean Baudrillard, a copy without an original or sign without a referent, like a digital image.

slapstick comedy:
Films known for physical humor and stunts. Some of the first films were slapstick comedies.

slasher films:
A subgenre of the horror film depicting serial killers, often considered to have originated with *Psycho* (1960).

slow cinema:
Movies, often contemporary international art films, where shots are sustained for a lengthy time, reinforcing the durational aspect of the medium.

slow motion:
A special effect that makes the action move at slower-than-normal speeds, achieved by filming the action at a high speed and then projecting it at standard speeds. See *fast motion*.

social documentaries:
Documentaries that examine issues, peoples, and cultures in a social context.

social melodrama:

A subgenre of the melodrama that extends the crises of the family to include larger historical, community, and economic issues.

soft lighting:
Diffused, low-contrast lighting that reduces or eliminates hard edges and shadows and can be more flattering when filming people.

sound bridge:
Sound that is carried over a picture transition or that belongs to the coming scene but is played before the image changes.

sound continuity:
The process of furthering the aims of the narrative through scoring, sound recording, mixing, and playback processes that strive for the unification of meaning and experience.

sound designer:
The individual responsible for planning and directing the overall sound of a film through to the final mix.

sound editing:
Combining music, dialogue, and effects tracks to interact with the image track; performed by a *sound editor*.

sound mixing:
The process by which all the elements of the soundtrack, including music, effects, and dialogue, are combined and adjusted to their final levels; also called *rerecording*.

sound montage:
The collision or overlapping of disjunctive sounds in a film.

sound perspective:
The apparent location and distance of a sound source.

sound recording:
The recording of dialogue and other sound that may take place simultaneously with the filming of a scene.

sound reproduction:
Sound playback during a film's exhibition.

soundstage:
A large soundproofed building designed to house the construction and movement of sets and props and effectively capture sound and dialogue during filming.

soundtrack:
Audio recorded to synchronize with a moving image, including dialogue, music, and sound effects; the physical portion of the film used for recorded sound.

source music:
Diegetic music; music whose source is visible onscreen.

special effects:
Techniques that enhance a film's realism or surpass realism with spectacle. They may be prepared in preproduction (such as building futuristic sets), generated in production (with camera filters or setups) or on set (such as pyrotechnics), or added in postproduction.

spectatorship:
The process of film viewing; the conscious and unconscious interaction of viewers and films as a topic of interest to film theorists.

spotting:
The process of determining where music and effects will be added to a film.

star system:
The practice of a studio system or a national film industry of promoting films and organizing audience expectation through the casting and cultivation of distinctive and well-known performers.

Steadicam:
A camera stabilization system introduced in 1976 that allows a camera operator to film a continuous and steady shot without a dolly or other device.

stereophonic sound:

The recording, mixing, and playback of sound on multiple channels to create audio perspective.

stereotype:
A character type that simplifies and standardizes perceptions that one group holds about another, often less numerous, powerful, or privileged group.

stinger:
Sound that forces the audience to notice the significance of something onscreen, such as the ominous chord struck when the villain's presence is made known.

stop-motion photography:
A process that records inanimate objects or actual human figures in different positions in separate frames and then synthesizes them on film to create the illusion of motion and action.

story:
The raw material of a narrative; *fabula*.

storyboard:
A shot-by-shot graphic representation of how a film or a film sequence will unfold.

story time:
The sequence of events inferred during the telling of a film story.

structural film:
An experimental film movement that emerged in North America in the 1960s, in which films followed a predetermined structure.

structuralism:
An approach to linguistics and anthropology that, when extended to literary and filmic narratives, looks for common structures rather than originality.

studio system:
The industrial practices of the large production companies responsible for filmmaking in Hollywood or other national film industries. During the Hollywood *studio era* extending from the late 1920s through the 1950s, the five major studios were MGM, Paramount, RKO, 20th Century Fox, and Warner Bros.

stylistic analysis:
A critical approach focusing on form, such as shot composition, editing, and the use of sound.

subgenre:
A specific version of a genre denoted by an adjective, such as the spaghetti western or the slapstick comedy.

subjective point of view:
A point of view that re-creates the perspective of a character as seen through the camera.

supernatural horror film:
A subgenre of the horror film in which a spiritual evil erupts in the human realm to avenge a wrong or for no explainable reason.

supporting actors:
Actors who play secondary characters in a film, serving as foils or companions to the central characters.

surrealist cinema:
An influential avant-garde movement of the 1920s that manipulated time, space, and material objects according to a dreamlike logic.

symbol:
In semiotics, a sign whose relation to its referent is purely based on convention, as in spoken or written language.

symbolic space:
A space transformed through spiritual or other abstract means related to the narrative.

synchronous sound:
Sound that is recorded during a scene or is synchronized with the filmed images and has a visible onscreen source; also referred to as *onscreen sound*.

take:
A single filmed version of a scene during production or a single shot onscreen.

talking head:
An on-camera interview that typically shows the speaker from the shoulders up.

Technicolor:
Patented color processing that uses three strips of film to transfer red, green, and blue directly onto a single image; developed between 1926 and 1932 and widely used until the 1950s.

telephoto lens:
A lens that has a focal length of at least 75mm and is capable of magnifying and flattening distant objects. See *zoom lens*.

theatrical musical:
A subgenre of the musical that is set in a theatrical milieu.

theatrical release window:
The period of time before a film's availability on home video, video on demand, or television platforms, during which it plays in movie theaters.

theatrical trailer:
A promotional preview of an upcoming release presented before the main feature or as a television commercial.

thesis statement:
A short statement (often a single sentence) that succinctly describes and anticipates each stage of an essay's argument. A *working thesis* is a rough version of a thesis used to draft an essay.

Third Cinema:
A term coined in the late 1960s in Latin America to echo the phrase and concept "Third World," Third Cinema opposed commercial and auteurist cinemas with a political, populist aesthetic and united films from a number of countries and contexts.

third-person narration:
A narration that assumes an objective and detached stance toward the plot and characters by describing events from outside the story.

30-degree rule:
A cinematography and editing rule that specifies that a shot should be followed by another shot taken from a position greater than 30 degrees from that of the first.

3D animation:
Computer animation that renders variations in height, width, and depth of a moving image.

360-degree pan:
A shot in which a camera completes a rotation around a fixed vertical axis.

three-point lighting:
A lighting technique common in Hollywood that combines key lighting, backlighting, and fill lighting to blend the distribution of light in a scene.

tie-ins:
Ancillary products (such as T-shirts, CD soundtracks, toys, and other gimmicks made available at stores and restaurants) that advertise and promote a movie.

tilt:
An upward or a downward rotation of the camera, whose tripod or mount remains in a fixed position, producing a vertical movement onscreen.

time image:
Philosopher Gilles Deleuze's term for filmmaking that represents the open-endedness of time without giving clear signals of spatial connection or logical sequence.

topicals:
Early films that captured or sometimes re-created historical or newsworthy events.

topic sentence:
A sentence (usually the first sentence of a paragraph) that announces the central idea to which all other sentences within the paragraph are related.

top lighting:
Used to illuminate the subject from above.

tracking shot:
A shot that changes the position of the point of view by moving forward, backward, or around the subject, usually on tracks that have been constructed in advance; also called a *traveling shot*. See *dolly shot*.

traditional animation:
Moving images drawn or painted on transparent sheets of celluloid known as cels, which are then photographed into single frames of film.

trailer:
A form of promotional advertising that previews edited images and scenes from a film in theaters before the main feature film or on a television commercial or website.

treatment:
A short prose description of the action of a film and major characters written before the screenplay or script.

2D animation:
Animation that renders a moving image or object with variation in height and width.

two-shot:
A shot depicting two characters.

underground film:
Nonmainstream film, associated particularly with the experimental film culture of 1960s and 1970s New York and San Francisco.

underlighting:
Used to illuminate the subject from below.

underscoring:
A film's background music; contrasts with source music.

unit production manager:
A member of a film's production team responsible for reporting and managing the details of receipts and purchases.

unreliable narration:
A type of narration that raises questions about the truth of the story being told; also called *manipulative narration*.

value:
The degree of lightness or darkness of a color.

verisimilitude:
The quality of fictional representation that allows readers or viewers to accept a constructed world — its events, its characters, and their actions — as plausible (literally, "having the appearance of truth").

video:
Analog or digital electronic medium that captures, records, stores, displays, and transmits moving images.

video art:
Artists' use of the medium of video in installations and gallery exhibitions, beginning in the late 1960s.

video on demand (VOD):
The distribution of films through cable or online services that allow consumers to purchase and view movies on computers and home video screens.

viral marketing:
The process of advertising that relies on existing social networks to spread a marketing message by word of mouth, electronic messaging, or other means.

virtual cinematography:
The process of image capture in a computer environment, which may be incorporated into live-action cinematography or other computer-generated imagery.

visual effects (VFX):
Special effects created in postproduction through digital imaging.

voice-off:

A voice that originates from a speaker who can be inferred to be present in the scene but is not visible onscreen.

voiceover:
A voice whose source is neither visible in the frame nor implied to be offscreen and typically narrates the film's images, such as in a flashback or the commentary in a documentary film.

walla:
A nonsense word spoken by extras in a film to approximate the sound of a crowd during sound dubbing.

western:
A film genre set in the American West, typically featuring rugged, independent male characters on a quest or dramatizing frontier life.

wide-angle lens:
A lens with a short focal length (typically less than 35mm) that allows cinematographers to explore a depth of field that can simultaneously show foreground and background objects or events in focus.

wide release:
The premiere of a movie at many locations simultaneously.

widescreen processes:
Any of a number of systems introduced in the 1950s that widened the image's aspect ratio and the dimensions of the movie screen.

widescreen ratio:
The wider, rectangular aspect ratio of typically 1.85:1 or 2.35:1. See *academy ratio*.

wipe:
A transition used to join two shots by moving a vertical, horizontal, or sometimes diagonal line across one image to replace it with a second image that follows the line across the frame.

women's picture:

A category of films produced in the 1930s to 1950s, featuring female stars in romances or melodramas and marketed primarily to women.

Works Cited:
List of sources cited in an essay, positioned on a separate page immediately after the last page of the essay text.

Works Consulted:
Optional list of sources that have been consulted but not cited in the text or notes of an essay; appears on a separate page after the Works Cited list.

zoom-in:
The act of changing the lens's focal length to narrow the field of view of a distant object, magnifying and reframing it, often in close-up, while the camera remains stationary. See *zoom-out*.

zooming:
Rapidly changing focal length of a camera to move the image closer or farther away.

zoom lens:
A lens with variable focal length. See *telephoto lens*.

zoom-out:
Reversing the action of a zoom-in by adjusting the lens's focal length so that objects that appear close initially are distanced and reframed as small figures. See *zoom-in*.

Index

A

A pictures, 23
Aadahl, Erik, 225
Aardman Animations, 322, 324f
ABC Close-Up! 279
Abels, Michael, 218f
About a Boy, 260
above-the-line expenses, 8
absolute film, 306–307
abstraction, 317–318
Academy Awards, 42
Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, 72
academy ratio, 129
Acres, Birt, 276
Across the Universe, 355, 355f
acting styles, 102
action films, 340
actions, in character coherence, 242
activist videos, 279, 329
actors, 99–104, 246
actualities, 276
Adam, 72
Adams, Randall, 297
Adam's Rib, 348

Adaptation, 237, 409
adaptations, 233–235
Adorno, Theodor, 394
The Adventures of Prince Achmed, 307, 307f
The Adventures of Robin Hood, 107
The Adventures of Robinson Crusoe, 256
advertising, 28–32
Æon Flux, 361
affect, 402
Afolayan, Kunle, 76
African American filmmaking. *See also* blaxploitation
    in 21st century, 73
    Burnett and, 24
    in early cinema, 45
    experimental strategies, 329, 329f
    gangster films, 363
    Greaves and, 313
    independent filmmaking, 399
    Lee and, 64–65, 100–101
    Micheaux and, 49, 78–79
    race movies, 45, 49
African Americans, 51, 198, 216–217, 312, 396, 397–399. *See also* Blaxploitation
African cinema, 67–68, 76
The African Queen, 107
The Age of Innocence, 131, 131f
agents, 9–10
Aguirre: The Wrath of God, 67

AIDS crisis, 329, 329f
Akerman, Chantal, 140, 213, 314, 318
Akin, Fatih, 67, 74
Akira, 315, 315f
Alamo Drafthouse Theater, 33
Alexander Nevsky, 221, 221f
Alexandria … Why? 67
Alexie, Sherman, 65
Ali, Naushad, 61
Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves, 234, 234f
Ali: Fear Eats the Soul, 41, 365, 365f
Alice, 322
Alice in the Cities, 67
Alice in Wonderland, 87
Alien, 132, 132f, 242, 336, 357, 361
Alien: Covenant, 336
Alita: Battle Angel, 64, 172f
All About My Mother, 393
All Quiet on the Western Front, 109
All That Heaven Allows, 41, 365, 365f, 389, 389f
All That Jazz, 356
Allegretto, 308, 308f
Allegro Non Troppo, 315
Allen, Dede, 186
Allen, Woody, 102, 261, 346
Almendros, Nèstor, 12, 138
Almodóvar, Pedro, 251, 393, 393f

alternative film narrative, 266–267, 267f, 268–269
Althusser, Louis, 389
Altman, Robert, 208, 210, 210f, 339, 339f
Alvin and the Chipmunks, 312
ambiguous sequences, 177–178, 178f
Amélie, 57
America, 329, 329f
The American Cinema (Sarris), 385
American Film Institute, 427
The American Friend, 339
American Graffiti, 217
American Honey, 261
American Hustle, 103
An American in Paris, 89, 105f, 177
American International Pictures, 54
American Pie, 360
American Psycho, 65
American Revolutionary: The Evolution of Grace Lee Boggs, 294
American Sign Language (ASL), 225f
Amour, 74, 255, 255f
Amreeka, 72, 72f
analytic philosophy, 402
analytical essays, elements of, 413–414. *See also* film essays
analytical positions, 288
anamorphic lens, 123
Anatomy of a Murder, 200f
ancillary markets, 17–21

And God Created Woman, 392f
Anders, Allison, 65
Anders als die Andern (Different from the Others), 47
Anderson, Laurie, 317
Anderson, Paul Thomas, 63, 126
Anderson, Wes, 215
Anger, Kenneth, 326, 326f
animated musicals, 356–357, 357f
animation, 71, 304–305
    changing technologies in, 324
    history of, 305–317
    modes of, 322–323
    perspectives on, 325–329
    principles of, 317–322
anime, 59, 309, 315, 325, 331
Annie Hall, 346
Anoff, Matiki, 100
antagonists, 244
Antheil, George, 307
Anthology Film Archives, 309
anthology films, 261
anthropological films, 296
Antichrist, 74
Antonioni, Michelangelo, 175, 385, 402–403
Aparajito, 267
Apocalypse Now, 200
Apollo 11, 274, 274f
apparatus theory, 390–391

apparent motion, 119
Applause, 221
The Apple, 70
Apropos of Nice, 288
Apted, Michael, 283
archetypes, 246, 341, 341f, 342, 342f
archives, film preservation and, 77
Aristotle, 337
Arnheim, Rudolf, 380, 381, 382
Arrival, 138
Arrival of a Train at La Ciotat, 380f
art cinema, 174–175, 236–237, 267. *See also* international art cinema
art directors, 10, 88–89
art films, 23
The Art of the Moving Picture (Lindsay), 379, 410
The Art of Vision, 326
Artaud, Antonin, 326
The Artist, 57
Arugbá, 76, 76f
Arzner, Dorothy, 51, 51f, 77, 158
Asian Americans, 51
aspect ratio, 123, 129–131, 130f, 131f
associative organizations, 319–320, 320f
Astaire, Fred, 110
The Astronomer's Dream, 342f
asynchronous sound, 202–205, 218, 224
Atanarjuat: The Fast Runner, 295, 295f
Atget, Eugène, 327

Atmos sound system, 225
atmosphere, mise-en-scène and, 91–92
The Atomic Cafe, 294–295
Attack of the Crab Monsters, 54
attention, 222–223
audience expectations, 343–345
audiences, 17, 54, 394–396, 418–420
audio and visual media, 30
augmented reality (AR), 322
Auric, Georges, 308
Austrian Heimat films, 369
auteur theory, 57, 384–385
auteurs, 11, 126
authenticity, 222–223
automated dialogue replacement (ADR), 208
The Automatic Moving Company, 317, 324
The Automobile Thieves, 87
avant-garde films, 304, 306–307, 379–380, 380f
Avatar, 27, 34, 64, 72, 111, 127, 257, 257f
Avengers: Endgame, 159, 160f
average shot length (ASL), 179
Away from Her, 284
axis of action, 168

B

B pictures, 23
Babel, 138, 261, 261f
Babette's Feast, 93, 93f
Baby Driver, 161, 161f
Bachchan, Amitabh, 59
Back to the Future, 93, 93f, 246
background music, 214
backlighting, 97, 98f, 101
Baker, Sean, 71
Balázs, Béla, 380, 381–382, 382f
Baldwin, James, 211
Ball, Lucille, 51, 347
The Ballad of Buster Scruggs, 168f
Ballet mécanique, 307, 307f
Ballhaus, Michael, 12
Bambi, 312
Bamboozled, 398f
Band of Outsiders, 222
bankable, 9
Barbarosa, 367
Bardot, Brigitte, 392f
Barriga, Cecelia, 191
Barry Lyndon, 99, 99f, 142
Barthes, Roland, 386
Barton Fink, 110, 209

Baseball, 295
Basie, Count, 214, 214f
Bassett, Angela, 245
Batman v. Superman: Dawn of Justice, 246
The Battle of Algiers, 59, 108, 142
The Battle of Manila Bay, 106
The Battle over Citizen Kane, 37
Battleship Potemkin, 48, 157, 159f, 178–179, 245, 246, 249, 417
Baudrillard, Jean, 403–404, 404f
Baudry, Jean-Louis, 390–391
Baum, L. Frank, 231
Baumbach, Noah, 137
Bazin, Andrè, 57, 179, 366, 380, 382–384, 383f
Be Kind Rewind, 20, 20f
Beasts of the Southern Wild, 175, 176f
Beatty, Warren, 55, 187f, 245
Becky Sharp, 139
behaviors, in character coherence, 242
Beijing Film Academy, 68
Being John Malkovich, 111, 316
Bell Laboratories, 203
below-the-line expenses, 8
Beltrami, Marco, 225
Bend It Like Beckham, 129, 129f
Ben-Day dots, 330
Ben-Hur, 235, 255, 265, 265f
Benigni, Roberto, 245, 246f
Benjamin, Walter, 327–328, 380, 382

Benshi, 46
Bergman, Ingmar, 54, 118, 385
Bergson, Henri, 402
Berkeley Media Resources Center, 427
Berlin: Symphony of a Great City, 307
Bernhardt, Sarah, 88
Bernstein, Elmer, 209f
Bernstein, Leonard, 217
Bertolucci, Bernardo, 267, 267f
The Best Years of Our Lives, 53, 136, 136f, 163, 163f, 179, 236, 236f
The Betrayal, 49
Beyond the Lights, 72f
Biberman, Herbert J., 238
bibliographic indexes, 426
Bicycle Thieves, 56, 112–113, 112f, 113f
Bier, Susanne, 74
The Big Chill, 217
"Big Five" studios, 50
The Big Short, 189, 189f
The Big Sleep, 54, 166, 167f, 168, 169, 169f, 221
Bigelow, Kathryn, 27, 72, 242
biographical films, 241–242, 242f
Birdman, 90, 125, 411–412, 411f
The Birds, 110, 162, 173, 173f
Birnbaum, Dara, 325, 325f
The Birth of a Nation, 15, 15f, 45, 78–79, 156, 157f, 214, 264
The Birth of a Nation (2016), 73
Bitzer, Billy, 121

Blachè, Alice Guy, 45, 45f
Black Audio Film Collective, 329
Black Girl, 67–68, 68f, 315
Black God, White Devil, 58
Black Maria studio, 105
Black Panther, 5, 127, 399
Black Swan, 353, 353f, 365
blackface, 398f
BlacKkKlansman, 65, 65f
Blade Runner, 22, 22f, 64, 90, 214, 222
Blair, Tony, 281
The Blair Witch Project, 30, 30f
Blanchett, Cate, 95
blaxploitation, 24, 55, 339
Blazing Saddles, 214, 214f, 336–337
Bleak House (Dickens), 232
The Blind Side, 91–92
The Bling Ring, 217
block booking, 16
blockbuster era, 62–63
blockbusters, 23, 26, 89–90
blocking, 101, 104, 104f, 413f
Blonde Venus, 145
Blood and Sand, 158
The Blood of a Poet, 308
Blue, 201, 320
The Blue Angel, 51, 102, 102f, 199

The Blue Bird, 258
The Blue Danube (Strauss), 184
Blue Jasmine, 177
"blue movies," 338, 338f
Blue Velvet, 64
Blunt, Emily, 225f
Blu-ray format, 19
Bobo, Jacqueline, 396
bodily movement, 102
Body and Soul, 49
Body Heat, 364
Boese, Carl, 357
Bogart, Humphrey, 103, 104
Bogdanovich, Peter, 37
Bohemian Rhapsody, 153
Bollywood films, 61, 75–76, 340, 340f
Bong Joon-ho, 75
"Bonjour Cinéma" (Epstein), 379
Bonnie and Clyde, 27–28, 28f, 55, 147, 186–187, 186f, 187f, 245
The Book of All the Dead, 314
Booksmart, 253, 253f
Borat, 298, 298f
Border, 86–87, 86f
Borderline, 307, 307f
Bordwell, David, 402
Born into Brothels, 279–280
Born to Dance, 223, 223f

The Boss, 347
Bourne series, 243, 259
Boyhood, 283
Boyle, Anthony Dod, 125
Boyle, Danny, 76
Boys Don't Cry, 66, 351, 352f
Boyz N the Hood, 363
Bozzetto, Bruno, 315
Bradley, Garrett, 329
Brakhage, Stan, 306f, 309, 316, 326
Brando, Marlon, 102, 102f
Brazil, 106
The Breadwinner, 324
The Breakfast Club, 244, 368
Breathless, 57, 160, 160f, 189
Brecht, Bertolt, 190
Breen, Joseph I., 50
Breil, Joseph Carl, 214
Bresson, Robert, 132, 223, 385
Bride & Prejudice, 76
Bridesmaids, 346, 346f
Bridges-Go-Round, 313, 325, 325f
Bridget Jones series, 212
Bridget Jones's Baby, 212f
Bring It On, 19, 368
Bringing Up Baby, 235, 235f, 346, 348, 414–416, 415f, 416f, 417, 421
Britell, Nicholas, 215

British New Wave, 57–58
British Sounds, 328
broadcast television distribution, 18–19
Brokeback Mountain, 107, 107f, 354, 354f
Broken Blossoms, 82, 102, 165f, 352–353
Brooks, Mel, 214, 336–337
Broughton, James, 313
Browning, Tod, 359, 367
Brownlow, Kevin, 77
Buffalo Bill's Wild West, 348f
Bullock, Sandra, 397
Buñuel, Luis, 256, 291, 298, 299, 326, 344f
Burnett, Charles, 24, 399
Burns, Ken, 19, 295, 295f
Burton, Tim, 87, 324, 356
Burtt, Ben, 222
Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid, 149, 349, 349f

C

Cabaret, 102, 102f
The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari, 47, 47f, 260, 306, 359, 436–440, 437f, 439f
Cabiria, 56, 88, 111
cable television distribution, 18–19
Caché, 74
Café Lumière, 75
Cage, Nicolas, 409
Cagney, James, 245
Cahiers du cinèma, 57, 383–385, 384f, 389, 405
Caine, Rick, 297
Call Me by Your Name, 72, 73f
camera angles, 135–136, 135f
camera distance, 132–135
camera height, 135
camera lenses, 122
camera movement, 124
camera operators, 12, 121
Cameron, James, 23, 64, 72, 257
Campbell, Joseph, 388f
Campion, Jane, 135, 195
Canada, Indigenous people of, 295
Cannes Film Festival, 38, 58
canon, 43
canted frame, 129, 129f
cantinflas, 52
Canyon Cinema, 309

Caouette, Jonathan, 16
Cape Fear, 245
Capra, Frank, 50–51, 288
Captain Fantastic, 353, 353f
Captain Marvel, 390f
Cardiff, Jack, 138
Carell, Steve, 189f
Carnè, Marcel, 52
Carol, 66, 171f
Carrie, 128, 128f, 358, 361
Carrie Nation Smashing a Saloon, 338
Carroll, Noël, 402
Cars, 323
Carter, Ruth, 96f, 100
Casablanca, 103, 104, 215
Cash, Johnny, 255
Cassavetes, John, 55
cast, 12–13
Cast Away, 246, 256, 256f
Castaing-Taylor, Lucien, 299
casting directors, 9–10
cause-and-effect logic, 241f, 265
Cave of Forgotten Dreams, 288, 288f
Cavell, Stanley, 386
Cecil B. Demented, 367
The Celebration, 74, 125, 141
celebrity culture, 73
cellulose acetate film, 121

cels, 322, 324
censorship, 236, 238
Central Station, 109, 410
Chabrol, Claude, 384
Chadha, Gurinder, 76
Chahine, Youssef, 67
Chalkroom, 317
Chan, Jackie, 69
Chan Is Missing, 65
Chaplin, Charlie, 28, 28f, 46, 103, 199, 307, 307f, 385
character actors, 103
character analysis, 417, 417f
character coherence, 242–243, 243f
character depth, 243–244
character development, 247–248
character hierarchies, 244–245
character roles, 241–242
character types, 103, 245–247
characterization, 50, 215
characters, 239, 240–248
Chazelle, Damien, 202f
The Cheat, 182
checklist, writer's, 424–425
Chelsea Girls, 312, 313f
Chen Kaige, 68
Chenzira, Ayoka, 399
Chiaroscuro lighting, 99, 99f
Chicken Run, 322, 324, 324f

Chikara to Onna no Yo no Naka, 309
Child, Julia, 421, 421f
Children of Men, 180–181
The Children's Hour, 50, 50f
Chin, Jimmy, 273
China, as film market, 71–72
Chinese cinema, 68–69, 75
Chinese diaspora cinema, 399, 399f
Cholodenko, Lisa, 72
Chomet, Sylvain, 316, 356
Choy, Christine, 295
Christopher Strong, 51
Chronicle of a Summer, 279, 299, 299f
The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe, 246
chronology, 176
chronophotography, 120
Chytilová, Vèra, 58
Cimino, Michael, 14–15
Cinderella, 234
cine de sacerdotes, 344
Cinecittà, 89
Cinéma (Delluc), 379
cinema, prehistory of, 87–88, 119–120
Cinema 16, 309
Cinema Novo movement, 58
cinéma vérité, 278, 279, 297, 299
CinemaScope, 123, 130, 200, 203
Cinémathèque Française, 384

cinematic realism, 89, 158
Cinématographe, 120
cinematographer, 12–13
cinematography, 117–149
    elements of, 127–144
    history of, 118–127
    image as presentation and representation, 145–146
    Once Upon a Time … in Hollywood, 148–149
    traditions of images, 146–147
cinephilia, 385
Cinéthique, 384
The Circle, 70
Cissé, Souleymane, 68
Citizen Kane
    Academy Awards and, 42
    aspect ratio, 129, 130
    auteur theory and, 385
    cinematography, 122
    exhibition of, 36–37, 36f
    flashbacks, 177
    lighting in, 97
    reframing, 140, 140f
    setting of, 90
    sound, 199
A City of Sadness, 69
The Civil War, 295, 295f
Clair, René, 52, 202, 221, 326
clapperboards, 208, 208f

Clarke, Shirley, 313, 325, 325f
classical cinema, 50–52
classical film narrative, 241, 265–266, 268–269
classical film theories, 380–383
classical genre traditions, 366–368
classical Hollywood narrative, 235
claymation, 322, 324
Cléo from 5 to 7, 236, 236f, 250
Clerks, 9
The Clock, 320
Clooney, George, 103–104
Close Up, 307, 307f, 410
close-ups (CU), 132–133, 133f
Cloud Atlas, 250
Clueless, 174, 175f, 400–401, 400f, 401f
Cocteau, Jean, 308
codes, 387
Cody, Diablo, 360, 361
cognitivism, 402
Cohen, Sacha Baron, 298
Cohl, Émile, 110, 304, 304f, 317, 324
colonialism, 398, 398f
color, 137–139, 137f–139f, 148f
color correction, 138
color filters, 143
color grading, 138
The Color Purple (Walker), 396
color timing, 138

Columbia Film Language Glossary, 427
Columbia Pictures, 339
comedies, 47, 346–348, 346f, 347f
commercial auteur, 64
Comolli, Jean-Louis, 389
comparative analysis, 417, 421, 421f
composition, 82, 132, 132f
computer animation, 322–323
Computer Chess, 137
computer-generated imagery (CGI), 13, 63, 125, 139, 257, 316, 322–323, 377–378
The Conformist, 267, 267f
confrontational approaches, 327–329, 328f
Conjuring series, 358
Conner, Bruce, 191
connotations, 387
Conrad, Tony, 317
constructive mise-en-scène, 110–111
contemporary film theory, 386–405
Contempt, 140–141, 232, 233f
Contesting Tears (Cavell), 386
contextual topics, 417, 421
contexualized props, 93–94
continuity editing, 157–159, 160f, 165–175, 188
contrapuntal sound, 204
contrast, 137–138
contrastive organizations, 283
conventions, 341

Coogler, Ryan, 5, 127
Cook, David A., 436
Cooper, Merian C., 296
Coppola, Francis Ford, 55, 160, 200
Coppola, Sofia, 72, 217
Coraline, 322, 322f
Corman, Roger, 54
Cornell, Joseph, 308
Corrigan, Timothy, 385
Costa, Pedro, 405f
Costin, Midge, 200f
Costner, Kevin, 350f
costume designers, 10–11
costumes, 94–96, 95f, 96f, 100, 100f
counter cinema, 328
The Cove, 282
coverage, 127
The Covered Wagon, 158, 350
crane shot, 135
Crash, 261, 398
Cravalho, Auli'l, 210
Crawford, Joan, 393
Crazy Rich Asians, 109, 109f
Creature from the Black Lagoon, 34
credits, 6, 249, 250f
Creed, 5, 247, 247f
Creed II, 145
crime films, 359, 362–364, 362f

Criterion, 405
The Criterion Collection, 427
critical essays, 419–420
critical objectivity, 411
Crooklyn, 162, 162f
crosscutting, 156
Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon, 344
Cruise, Tom, 28–29, 418
Cuarón, Alfonso, 117, 180–181
Cuban Institute of Cinematographic Art and Industry, 62
cues, 214–215
cultural analysis, 421
cultural promotion, 27
cultural props, 93
Cultural Revolution, 68–69, 94
cultural studies, 394–399
"The Culture Industry" (Horkheimer), 394
cumulative organizations, 282–283
The Curious Case of Benjamin Button, 95
Curtiz, Michael, 212
cutaways, 178
cuts, 127, 155, 162–165
cutting, 191
cutting on action, 170
cutting on movement, 172f
Czech New Wave, 58

D

Dabis, Cherien, 72
Daddy's Home, 347
Daguerre, Louis-Jacques-Mandé, 119
dailies, 12
Daisies, 58
Dali, Salvador, 326, 327f
Damon, Matt, 85
Dance, Girl, Dance, 51
Dancer in the Dark, 192, 356
Dances with Wolves, 350, 350f
Daniels, Lee, 73
Danish filmmaking, 74
The Dark Knight, 397
Dark Victory, 353
Dark Waters, 344
Dash, Julie, 65, 395
Daughters of the Dust, 65, 268–269, 269f, 395
Davis, Bette, 95, 393
Davis, Peter, 287
Davis, Viola, 396–397, 397f, 425
Davy, Sir Humphrey, 275
Day, Benjamin Henry, Jr., 330
Day, Doris, 396
Day for Night, 111
The Day the Earth Stood Still, 344, 344f, 367
day-and-date release, 23

Day-Lewis, Daniel, 12
Days of Heaven, 138
De Hirsch, Storm, 317–318, 318f
De Niro, Robert, 245, 246, 266f
De Sica, Vittorio, 56, 112–113
Dead Birds, 296, 296f
The Dead Don't Die, 110
deadline structure, 253, 253f
Deakins, Roger, 126
Dean, James, 130, 395, 395f
Death of a Salesman, 70
Debord, Guy, 328
Decasia, 320, 320f
deep focus, 136, 136f
deep-focus cinematography, 122, 235
The Deer Hunter, 62–63, 246
"A Defence of Poetry" (Shelley), 305
The Defiant Ones, 53
Deleuze, Gilles, 402–403, 403f
Delluc, Louis, 379
DeMille, Cecil B., 34, 46–47, 47f
Demy, Jacques, 201, 202f
denotation, 387
The Departed, 12f, 363
Depp, Johnny, 104
depth of field, 122, 136–142, 137f
The Derby, 44, 44f
Deren, Maya, 123, 308, 310–311, 311f, 313

descriptive approaches, 365–366
Desert Hearts, 165f
Desperate Living, 367
Desperately Seeking Susan, 64, 243
Despicable Me, 323
Despicable Me 2, 21
Destino, 326, 327f
Détective, 364
detective films, 363–364
détournement, 328
Detroit, 27, 27f
Devdas, 340, 340f
developmental organizations, 283, 286
The Devil Wears Prada, 96, 245, 245f, 248
dialectical montage, 157
dialogue, 50, 51, 210
Diana, Princess, 280–281
Diary of a Mad Black Women, 73
A Diary of Chuji's Travels, 369
diaspora cinemas, 399
DiCaprio, Leonardo, 95, 148–149
Dickens, Charles, 232
Dickerson, Ernest R., 100
Dickson, W. K. L., 120, 197, 197f
Dickson Experimental Sound Film, 197f
Die Hard series, 245
Die Hard: With a Vengeance, 254

diegesis, 205, 248–249
diegetic elements of narrative films, 248–250
diegetic sound, 204–205, 224
Dietrich, Marlene, 51, 102, 145, 191, 199, 393–394, 394f
digital cinema package (DCP), 127, 203
digital cinematography, 124–127
digital culture, and film theory, 404–405
digital editing systems, 183
digital era, 71–76, 161, 161f
digital intermediate (DI), 126
"digital natives," 432
Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge (The Big Hearted Will Take the Bride), 75, 185, 185f
direct cinema, 279, 297, 299. *See also* cinéma vérité
direct quotations, 433–434
direct sound, 208
directional lighting, 97
director, 11–12
director of photography. *See* Cinematographer
disability studies, 402
disjunctive editing, 188–190
Disneynature, 280
dissolve, 164, 165f, 178
distanciation, 190
distribution, 14–23
    ancillary markets, 17–21
    day-and-date release, 23
    distributors, 14–17

feature films, 15
of *Killer of Sheep*, 24–25
multiple releases, 22
online, 20–21
release strategies, 16–17
target audiences, 17
timing of, 21–23
Do the Right Thing, 65, 100–101, 100f, 101f, 244, 247
Doctor Strange, 71
documentary animation, 323
documentary films, 273–299
assumptions, confronting, 291–292
elements of, 280–290
history of, 275–280
interpretive contexts and traditions, 293–298
marketing and promotion, 28
opinions, altering, 292–293
documentary organizations, 282–286
documentation format, 434–435
dogme movement, 74, 141
Dogtown and Z-Boys, 296
Dolby Atmos, 299
Dolby Laboratories, 200, 225
Dolby noise-reduction technology, 221
dolly shot, 140
dolly zoom, 143
Don Juan, 198, 203
Donen, Stanley, 206

Donnersmarck, Florian Henckel von, 74
Donovan's Brain, 107–108
Don't Look Now, 177, 177f, 359
Dörrie, Doris, 67
Double Indemnity, 364
Doubt, 396
The Downward Path, 88
Doyle, Christopher, 138
Dr. Mabuse: The Gambler, 47
Dr. Strangelove, or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb, 201, 201f
Dracula, 357
Dreamgirls, 356
DreamWorks, 125, 316, 323
Drew, Robert, 279
Dreyer, Carl Theodor, 49, 174
Drifters, 293
Drive, 365
drive-in movie theaters, 54
Dulac, Germaine, 49, 147, 181, 306–307, 326, 380, 380f
Dunaway, Faye, 186f
Dunkirk, 106, 107f, 203, 203f, 261
Dunye, Cheryl, 298
Duras, Marguerite, 177, 223, 314
duration, 178–181
duration, narrative, 254
Durbin, Deanna, 397
DuVernay, Ava, 73

DVD format, 19, 131
Dyer, Richard, 396, 397
Dziga Vertov Group, 57, 328

E

early cinema, 44–45, 155–156, 156f
Early Summer, 174
The Earrings of Madame de …, 140
East Asian cinema, 75
East Palace, West Palace, 69
Eastman Kodak, 120–121, 139
Eastwood, Clint, 349, 350, 412f
Easy A, 368, 368f
Easy Rawlins series, 359
Easy Rider, 187
Eat Pray Love, 147
Ebert, Roger, 37
The Edge of Heaven, 67, 74, 74f
Edge of Tomorrow, 237–238
Edison, Thomas, 105, 120, 197, 203
Edison Company, 275–276
editing, 13
    elements of, 162–182
    history of, 154–161, 155f
    primary traditions for, 188–191
    as subjective experience or objective perspective, 184–185
    technology in, 183
Eggeling, Viking, 306
8½, 54, 237
Eisenstein, Sergei, 48, 156–157, 159f, 192, 221, 221f, 245, 249, 255, 307, 320, 380, 381, 402

El Mannouni, Ahmed, 77
Elder, Bruce, 314
Elizabeth II, 280–281
Ellington, Duke, 200f
ellipsis, 178
Emanorada, 52
Emma, 216
Emma (Austen), 400
Empire, 312
Ender's Game, 396
Enoch Arden, 105
ensemble cast, 244
Enthusiasm, 308
Entr'acte, 326
Ephron, Nora, 72, 348
epic westerns, 350, 350f
Episode IX: The Rise of Skywalker, 216
Epstein, Jean, 49, 306–307, 379
Epstein, Robert, 294
essay form, 276
establishing shots, 166, 167f, 175f
E.T.: The Extra-Terrestrial, 92
Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind, 252, 252f
ethnographic films, 295–297, 296f
European cinema
    in 1930s and 1940s, 51–52
    film culture in 21st century, 74
Everest, 145, 145f

everyday mise-en-scène, 109
Eve's Bayou, 213, 213f
evidence, 421
"The Evolution of the Language of Cinema" (Bazin), 382–383
Ex Machina, 342
exclusive release, 17
executive producer, 8
exhibition, 32–38
    of *Citizen Kane*, 36–37
    contexts and practices, 33
    definition of, 32
    technologies and cultures of, 33–35, 35f
    timing of, 35–38
exhibitors, 32
Exiled, 363, 363f
existential westerns, 350, 350f
The Exorcist, 358, 358f
expanded cinema, 321
experimental media, 304–305
    history of, 305–317
    perspectives on, 325–329
    principles of, 317–322
    styles and approaches to, 325–329
experimental organizations, 319–322
explorative positions, 287–288
expositions, 282–286
expressive mise-en-scène, 110
expressive styles and forms, 326–327

external change, in character development, 248
extras, 103
extreme close-up (ECU), 133, 133f
extreme long shot (ELS), 133, 133f
Eye Myth, 326
eyeline match, 170, 171f, 174
Eyes Wide Shut, 28–29, 29f
Eyre, Chris, 65

F

F for Fake, 298
Face/Off, 69
Faces, 55
Faces Places, 283, 286f
fade-in, 164
fade-out, 164
fades, 178
Fairbanks, Douglas, 103, 339
fake documentaries, 298
The Fall of the House of Usher, 49, 379
The Fall of the Romanov Dynasty, 158, 191, 277
family melodramas, 353, 353f
fan engagement, 31–32
fan magazines, 32
Fandor, 427
Fantasia, 309, 324, 324f, 357
Fantasmagorie, 110, 304, 304f
Fantastic Four series, 17
Fantastic Mr. Fox, 106, 106f
Far from Heaven, 41, 66, 209f, 365, 365f
The Farewell, 399, 399f
Farhadi, Asghar, 70
Fassbinder, Rainer Werner, 41, 66, 365
Fast & Furious 9, 340
The Fast and Furious: Tokyo Drift, 218

fast motion, 142
The Favourite, 92, 92f
The FBI, 149
feature films, evolution of, 15
Fèlix, Maria, 52
Fellini, Federico, 54, 237
female spectatorship, 393
Female Trouble, 367
feminist film theory, 392–393, 392f, 393f, 396
femme fatale, 54
Fences, 396, 397f, 425, 425f
Fernandez, Emilio "El Indo," 52
Ferrell, Will, 347, 397
Feuillade, Louis, 49
Field of Dreams, 103
Fifth Generation, 68–69
Figgis, Mike, 183
Fight Club, 260, 260f, 263
figuration, 318–319
The Figurine: Araromire, 76
fill lighting, 97, 98f
Film & Television Literature Index with Full Text, 427
Film about a Woman Who … , 313
film aesthetics, 381–382
Film as Art (Arnheim), 382
Film Comment, 426
film culture
    in 21st century, 74–76

in Africa, 76
in East Asia, 75
global Bollywood, 75–76
in transnational Europe, 74
Film Culture, 384, 385
film essays
analytical, 410–414
elements of, 421–425
example of, 418–420, 428–431, 436–440
preparation for writing, 414–421
research for, 425–435
Film Foundation, 43, 77
film gauge, 121, 121f
film genres
classical and revisionist traditions, 366–368
examples of, 345–364
gender and, 360–361
history of, 336–340
local and global, 368–369
perspectives on, 364–369
prescriptive and descriptive approaches, 365–366
film journals, 383–384
Film No. 4 (Bottoms), 313
film noir, 54, 339, 345, 364, 364f
Film Number 7, 319f
film preservation, 77
Film Quarterly, 384
film reviews, 413, 418–419

film shoot, 11
film stock, 121
Film Studies for Free, 405
film theory, 376
    classical, 380–383
    contemporary, 386–405
    early, 378–380
    evolution of, 377–378
    postwar film culture and criticism, 383–386
Film-Makers' Cooperative, 309, 313
FilmSound.org, 427
filters, 123
financing of film production, 9
Fincher, David, 12, 209, 216, 263
Finding Nemo, 231
Fireworks, 326, 326f
First Name: Carmen, 222
first-person narrative, 258
first-run theaters, 16
Fischinger, Oskar, 308, 308f
Fish Tank, 141, 141f
Fitzcarraldo, 67
Fitzgerald, F. Scott, 235
Flaherty, Robert, 274, 277, 287, 296, 297
Flaming Creatures, 313, 313f
flares, 123
flashbacks, 176–177, 251–253, 258
flashforwards, 176–177, 177f, 252–253

Fleischmann, Peter, 369
Flesh, 312
The Flicker, 182, 317
Flowers and Trees, 122, 139, 139f
Flowers of Shanghai, 179–180
Floyd Norman: An Animated Life, 312
Flynn, Gillian, 262
focal lengths, 122
Fog of War, 288
Foley, Jack, 208
foley artists, 208, 208f
foley effects, 225
foley stage, 208
following shots, 141
Fonda, Jane, 328, 328f
Foote, Shelby, 91
Footlight Parade, 383f
forced perspective, 142–143
Ford, John, 51, 53, 349, 366, 385
Ford Motor Company, 338
Fordism, 338
formal topics, 417
formalism, 380, 381–382
format wars, 19
formatting essays, 424
formulas, 341, 343
40 Acres and a Mule, 65
42nd Street, 355–356, 356f

Fosse, Bob, 356
Foster, Bill, 45
Foster Photoplay Company, 45
found footage, 315
The 400 Blows, 57, 141
Four Rooms, 261
4K resolution, 126
Fox, 198
Fox, Megan, 361
Fox Movietone Magic Carpet series, 198f
framing, 129, 129f
Frampton, Hollis, 321, 321f, 325
Frances Ha, 137, 137f
franchises, 237–238, 340, 340f
Frankenstein, 337, 357
Freaks, 359, 367
Frears, Stephen, 58, 280, 348, 348f, 422
Fred Ott's Sneeze, 45
Free Radicals, 317
Free Solo, 273
Freeman, Morgan, 397
French cinema, 48–49
The French Connection, 359, 362, 362f
French impressionist cinema, 49, 379–380, 380f
French New Wave, 56–58, 160, 384
frequency, narrative, 254
The Freshman, 131
Freud, Sigmund, 319

Freund, Karl, 121
Friedberg, Anne, 401, 404
Friedrich, Su, 326
From Caligari to Hitler (Kracauer), 383
From Show Girl to Burlesque Queen, 338, 338f
frontal lighting, 97
Frozen, 220, 220f, 357
Frozen II, 357
Fruitville Station, 5
Fuentes, Fernando de, 52
Full Metal Jacket, 130
Fuller, Samuel, 385
Funny Games, 359
The Furies, 350
Furious 7, 164
Fury, 104
Fuses, 313

G

Gaines, Cecil, 264
games, 237–238, 238f
Gance, Abel, 17, 49, 77, 94, 129
Gandhi, 398f
Gangs of New York, 90, 111, 256
gangster films, 363, 363f
Garbo, Greta, 191
The Garden of Earthly Delights, 306f
Gardner, Alex, 342
Gardner, Robert, 296
Garland, Judy, 231
Gas Food Lodging, 65
Gaslight, 89
Gates, Trevor, 218f
Gehr, Ernie, 321
gender
    costumes and make-up, 96
    film genres, 360–361
    film theories, 391–394
    narration, 262–263
gender performativity, 394
The General, 259, 347
generic formulas, 50
generic reflexivity, 367, 368f
generic revisionism, 367–368
genre, 336

genre criticism, 385
genre films. *See* film genres
genre theory, 385–386
Gently Down the Stream, 326
German expressionist cinema, 47–48, 110
German Heimat films, 369, 369f
Germany in Autumn, 261
Germany Year Zero, 383, 383f
Gerwig, Greta, 72, 126, 372
Get Out, 218, 218f, 335, 358
Getino, Octavio, 59, 293, 314–315
A Ghost Story, 147
Ghostbusters (1984), 31, 31f
Ghostbusters (2016), 134, 134f
Giant (2016), 318–319
Gibbons, Cedric, 89
Gibney, Alex, 281, 281f
Gibson, Mel, 27
Gilda, 54, 54f
Gill, David, 77
Ginger & Rosa, 134, 134f
Ginsburg, Ruth Bader, 286, 286f
The Girl Can't Help It, 139, 139f
The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo, 106, 216
Girlfight, 361
Gish, Lillian, 102, 165f, 397
Gladiator, 255

Glass, Philip, 281, 297
The Gleaners and I, 57f
Glimpse of the Garden, 327
global genres, 368–369
globalization, cinematic, 62–71, 404
    African cinema, 67–68
    American independent cinema, 64–66
    Chinese cinema, 68–69
    commercial auteur, 64
    European cinema, 66–67
    Iranian cinema, 69–71
    New Hollywood and blockbuster era, 62–63
Glory, 91, 91f, 264, 264f
Go Fish, 66
God Help the Girl, 356, 356f
The God: Part II, 246
Godard, Jean-Luc, 57, 140, 144, 160, 189, 190, 222, 233f, 266, 267, 314, 314f, 328, 328f, 364, 384
The Godfather, 55, 55f, 62, 99, 362
The Godfather: Part II, 62, 251, 340, 362
Godzilla, 59, 59f
Godzilla (2014), 336
Gold Diggers, 354
The Gold Diggers of Broadway, 27
The Gold Rush, 108
The Golem, 357, 357f, 358
Gondry, Michel, 20, 320

Gone Girl, 262–263, 262f, 263f
Gone with the Wind, 8, 51, 61, 89, 111, 214, 235, 244, 264, 398
Gong Li, 68
González Iñárritu, Alejandro, 125, 257f, 411
Goodfellas, 142, 142f, 363
Gordon, Douglas, 317
Gordon, Michael, 320
Gore, Al, 289, 289f
Gore, Lesley, 217f
Gorin, Jean-Pierre, 328, 328f
Gorky, Maxim, 378
The Graduate, 187, 253
The Grand Budapest Hotel, 11, 131, 132f
Grand Hotel, 89
Grand Illusion, 129, 244
The Grandmaster, 75
Grant, Catherine, 405
The Grapes of Wrath, 161
graphic blocking, 101, 104
graphic match, 172, 172f, 173f
Grass, 296
Gravity, 117, 259, 259f
The Great Adventure of Horus, Prince of the Sun, 315
Great Britain, rating systems in, 31
The Great Escape, 149
The Great Train Robbery, 155, 156f, 250, 349
Greaves, William, 313, 313f

Green Book, 17, 17f
green-screen technology, 13
Greenwood, Jonny, 215
Grey, Joel, 102, 102f
Grey Gardens, 292, 292f
Grierson, John, 273, 274, 278, 293
Griffith, D. W.
    The Birth of a Nation, 15, 15f, 45, 78–79, 156, 157f, 214, 264
    Broken Blossoms, 82, 102, 165f, 352–353
    crosscutting, 156
    Enoch Arden, 105
    Intolerance, 87, 87f, 260–261
    iris, 165f
    The Lonedale Operator, 45
    masks, 131
    melodramas, 197, 351, 352
    music and, 214
    nondiegetic inserts, 249
    star studies and, 397
Groundhog Day, 346
Guardians of the Galaxy series, 217
Guinness, Alec, 99
Guitry, Sacha, 94–95
Gunning, Tom, 317
Gutiérrez, Tomás Alea, 315
Gutiérrez Alea, Tomás, 62

H

Haggar, Walter, 275
Hairspray, 367
Hakujaden, 309
Hall, Stuart, 396
Hallelujah!, 198, 198f
Halloween, 359
Hamlet, 382f
Hammer, Barbara, 313
Hammett, Dashiell, 359
Hammid, Alexander, 123, 308, 310
Hana-bi, 363
The Hand, 320
The Hand That Rocks the Cradle, 359
handheld cameras, 122–123
handheld shots, 141–142, 141f
The Handmaiden, 254, 254f
Handsworth Songs, 329
Haneke, Michael, 74, 255
Hanks, Tom, 246, 396
    character type of, 103
    as a star, 103f
Happy Ending, 74
Happy Together, 69, 189, 190f
Hara-Kiri: Death of a Samurai, 58
Hard, Fast and Beautiful, 54

Hard Boiled, 179, 179f
hard lighting, 97–99
Hark, Tsui, 69
Harron, Mary, 65
Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets, 145–146
Harry Potter series, 216, 237
The Hateful Eight, 166
Hawks, Howard, 54, 166, 385, 414–415
Haynes, Todd, 16, 41, 66, 209f, 365
Hays, William H., 50, 198, 236
Hayworth, Rita, 54, 113
HBO, 279
A Healthy Baby Girl, 297, 297f
Hearst, William Randolph, 36
Hearts and Minds, 287
Heathers, 368
Heaven, 281
Heaven's Gate, 14–15
Hedwig and the Angry Inch, 303
Heimat, 67, 369, 369f
Heimat films, 368–369, 369f
The Heiress, 122, 123f
Helfland, Judith, 297
Hell or High Water, 422, 422f
Hellman, Lillian, 50
Helm, Brigitte, 342
The Help, 396

Hemingway, Ernest, 293
Hemphill, Essex, 316f
Hepburn, Katharine, 51, 346, 414–415, 415f, 416f
Hero, 138
Herzog, Werner, 67, 288, 288f, 368, 368f
Heston, Charlton, 265, 265f
Hey, Hey, Hey, It's Fat Albert, 312
The Hidden Half, 70
high angles, 135, 135f
High Anxiety, 337
High Noon, 215
High Plains Drifter, 349
high-definition (HD) digital video, 125
high-key lighting, 97, 98f, 101, 101f
highlighting, 97, 98f, 101
High-Rise, 23
Hiroshima mon amour, 57, 177, 252–253, 252f
Hirschfeld, Magnus, 47
His Girl Friday, 348, 415
Histoire(s) du cinéma, 328
historical documentaries, 294–295
historical epics, 343, 343f
historical location, 255
historical mise-en-scène, 109
historical paradigms, 366, 366f
historiography, 42
history, narrative films and, 264
history of film

cinematic globalization, 62–71
cinematography, 118–127
classical cinema, 50–52
digital era, 71–76
periodization, 42–43
postwar cinemas, 53–62
silent cinema period, 44–49
silent features in Hollywood, 46–47
History of Narrative Film (Cook), 436
Hitchcock, Alfred, 11–12, 53, 172, 185, 216, 235, 392
props, use of, 94
Rear Window, 136, 247
Suspicion, 92
Vertigo, 142
Hobbit, 126
The Hobbit: The Battle of Five Armies, 110
Hogarth, William, 337, 337f
Hold Me While I'm Naked, 327, 327f
Holland, Tom, 330
Hollywood
digital era, 71–72
postwar, 53–55
silent features in, 46–47
Hollywood Genres (Schatz), 386
Hollywood production model, 8
Hollywood star system, 240
"Hollywood Ten," 53, 238
Holmes, Elizabeth, 281, 281f

Holocaust, 67
home video, 19–21
The Homesteader, 49
Honest Hearts, 338f
Honeyland, 228, 292, 292f
Hong Kong cinema, 69, 75
Honnold, Alex, 273
Hooch Pieter de, 337
Horkheimer, Max, 394
Horne, Lena, 216–217, 217f
horror films, 357–359, 357f, 358f, 361, 366f
The Host, 358
Hou Hsiao-hsien, 179–180
The Hour of the Furnaces, 59, 293, 315
The Hours, 165
House of Wax, 123, 257, 257f
House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC), 53
How the Other Half Lives (Riis), 276, 276f
How to Get Away with Murder, 396, 397f
Howe, James Wong, 51, 98f
Howe, Lyman H., 275
Hsiao-hsien, Hou, 69, 267
Huang, Hsin-Chien, 317
Hubley, Emily, 303
Hudson, Rock, 41
hue, 138
Humphrey, Hubert H., 279
The Hunger Games, 32

The Hunger Games series, 243
Hunting Scenes from Bavaria, 369
The Hurt Locker, 90, 231, 242–243, 243f
Hustlers, 362, 362f
hybrid genres, 345, 345f

I

I, Daniel Blake, 58
I Accuse, 49
I Am Mother, 2
I Am Not Your Negro, 211
I Like It Like That, 65
The Ice Storm, 258, 258f
iconography, 341, 342
icons, 387
Ida, 131, 131f
ideological critique, 388–389, 389f
ideological location, 255
ideology, 389
If God Is Willing and da Creek Don't Rise, 280
Illumination, 323
I'm Not There, 16
images, and sound, 201–205
images, traditions of, 146–147, 155f
The Imaginary Signifier (Metz), 391
IMAX format, 124, 145f, 203
The Imitation Game, 104, 104f
Imitation of Life, 246–247, 246f, 353–354
immersive film narrative, 257
In a Better World, 74
In a Lonely Place, 158–159, 159f
In a World, 211, 212f

In the Bedroom, 415
In the Fade, 67
In the Heat of the Night, 53
In the Mood for Love, 69, 69f
In the Realm of the Senses, 31, 58
[in]Transition, 405, 427, 432
Inception, 63, 64f, 143, 143f, 178
An Inconvenient Sequel: Truth to Power, 288–289, 289f
An Inconvenient Truth, 289
The Incredibles, 319
The Incredibles 2, 319
Independence Day, 26, 26f
Independence Day: Resurgence, 26
independent films, 399
    American independent cinema, 64–66
    distribution of, 16
    marketing and promotion, 27–28
    postwar, 54
    preproduction, 8
index, 387
India Song, 223
Indian cinema, 59
    global Bollywood, 75–76
    Mother India, 60–61, 60f, 61f
Indiana Jones series, 216, 398
Indigenous cinema, 294, 294f, 295
Industrial Light & Magic, 124

Infante, Pedro, 52
Infernal Affairs, 363
Inglourious Basterds, 237, 237f
The Inheritors, 369
Innocents of Paris, 27, 27f
inserts, 166–168
Inside Llewyn David, 421
Inside Out, 325
instrumental props, 92–93, 100–101
integrated musicals, 356
intellectual montage, 157
intensity, 138
intercutting, 157
interest, generating, 23–28
interior decoration, 88–89
internal change, in character development, 248
internal diegetic sound, 205
international art cinema
    French New Wave, 56–58
    Indian cinema, 59
    Italian neorealism, 56
    Japanese cinema, 58–59
    postwar, 55–62
    Third cinema, 59–62
internet, 316–317
    marketing and promotion, 30
Internet Movie Database, 427
internet sources, 426–427, 433

interpretive community, 395
interrogative positions, 288
Interstellar, 90, 91f, 255
Intolerance, 46f, 87, 87f, 131, 249, 260–261
Inuit Broadcasting Network, 295
Invasion of the Body Snatchers, 358, 426, 426f
The Inventor: Out for Blood in Silicon Valley, 281, 281f
invisible editing. *See* continuity editing
Invocation of My Demon Brother, 326
Iranian cinema, 69–71
iris shot, 131, 165f
The Irishman, 228, 363, 376, 376f
iris-out, 131, 131f
Irma Vep, 11f
Islamic Revolution, 70
It Follows, 358, 358f
It Happened One Night, 50–51, 51f, 348
Italian neorealism, 25, 56, 89, 158
It's a Wonderful Life, 22, 22f
Ivens, Joris, 282–283, 293
Iwerks, Ub, 308

J

J. Edgar, 95
Jackie Brown, 133f
Jackson, Peter, 126, 143
Jackson, Samuel L., 211
Jacobs, Ken, 321
Jameson, Fredric, 403
Jandreau, Brady, 350
Japanese cinema, 46, 58–59, 75, 368–369. *See also* anime
Japanese Relocation, 278, 278f
Jarman, Derek, 58, 201, 320
Jarmusch, Jim, 110, 256, 410
Jason Bourne, 179
Jaws, 16, 62, 63, 63f, 89, 124, 124f, 220, 249, 249f, 339, 343–344
jazz music, 217
The Jazz Singer, 27, 47, 199, 199f, 203, 355
Jeanne Dielman, 23 Quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles, 178, 178f, 318
Jefferson, Joseph, 234
Jenkins, Barry, 215
Jennifer's Body, 360–361, 360f, 361f
Jennings, Humphrey, 293
Jerry Maguire, 253
Jezebel, 95
JFK, 239
Jia Zhangke, 75
jidai-geki films, 368–369, 369f

John, Elton, 181, 181f
Johnny Guitar, 341f, 350
Johnson, Dwayne, 210, 210f
Johnson, Martin and Osa, 277, 277f
Johnson, Noble, 45
Jojo Rabbit, 259–260, 260f
Joker, 396
Jolie, Angelina, 27
Jolson, Al, 199, 199f
Jonas, Joan, 304, 305f
Jones, James Earl, 103
Jonze, Spike, 316, 409
Jordan, Michael B., 5
The Joyless Street, 47
Ju dou, 68
Juice, 363
Julie & Julia, 72, 421, 421f
Julien, Isaac, 223
Jump Cut, 426
jump cuts, 160, 160f, 188–190, 189f, 190f
Jungle Adventures, 277
The Jungle Book, 312, 378f
Juno, 247, 361
Jurassic Park, 223, 223f
Jurassic World, 21

K

Kael, Pauline, 385
Kalin, Tom, 329, 329f
Kandahar, 70, 70f
Kaplan, E. Ann, 392
The Karate Kid, 247
Kar-wai, Wong, 69, 189
Kayapo people, 294
Kazan, Elia, 352
Keaton, Buster, 46, 259, 347, 375, 402
Keaton, Diane, 281
Kedi, 141
Keith-Albee-Orpheum vaudeville theaters, 199
Kelani, Tunde, 76
Kelly, Gene, 92, 206
Kemble, Fanny and John, 88
Kennedy, John F., 239, 279, 279f
Kettelhut, Erich, 89
key light, 97
keyframes, 322
Keystone Kops, 347
Khan, Mehboob, 59, 60–61
Khan, Shah Rukh, 75
Kharas, Firdaus, 329
Khatami, Mohammad, 70
Kiarostami, Abbas, 70, 266
Kickstarter, 9

The Kid, 28, 28f
Kidman, Nicole, 28–29
The Kids Are All Right, 9, 9f, 72
Kill Bill: Vol. 1, 142
Kill Bill: Vol. 2, 104, 180, 204, 204f
The Killer, 69, 340
Killer Films, 66
Killer of Sheep, 24–25, 25f
The Killers, 109
The Killing of Sacred Deer, 412
Kind Hearts and Coronets, 99
Kindergarten Cop, 103
Kinetograph, 120
Kinetoscope, 203
King, Richard, 203
The King and I, 398, 398f
King John, 234
King Kong, 143, 143f, 199, 220
King Lear, 139, 139f
King Lear (Shakespeare), 369
King Solomon's Mines, 107
Kingsley, Ben, 398f
The Kiss, 120, 120f
Kiss Me Deadly, 99
Kitano, Takeshi, 58, 363
Kluge, Alexander, 66, 314
Knowles, Beyoncé, 65, 73, 316

Kon, Satoshi, 325
Korean cinema, 75
Kore-Eda, Hirokazu, 58
Koyaanisqatsi, 281, 281f
Kracauer, Siegfried, 202, 378, 380, 383, 383f
Krasinski, John, 225f
Kubrick, Stanley, 28–29, 130, 142, 172, 341, 343
Kuchar, George, 327, 327f
Kuchar, Mike, 327
Kuleshov, Lev, 156, 184, 381
Kunis, Mila, 365
Kunuk, Zacharias, 295
Kuras, Ellen, 125
Kurelshi, Hanif, 348f
Kurosawa, Akira, 58, 369, 428
Kusama, Karyn, 72, 360, 361
Kwaidan, 358

L

La Bamba, 65
La Chambre, 140, 141f
La Ciénaga, 219, 219f
L.A. Confidential, 367
La dame aux camélias, 88
La La Land, 82, 201, 202f
La Negra, 78
Lacan, Jacques, 390, 402
Lady in the Lake, 258
The Lady Vanishes, 107
LaFontaine, Don, 211
Lagaan: Once upon a Time in India, 75
Lancer, 149
Land Without Bread, 291, 298, 299, 299f
Lang, Fritz, 47–48, 89, 211f, 342, 385
Langlois, Henri, 384
Lanthmos, Yorgos, 412
Lanzmann, Claude, 295
L'Argent, 49, 132f, 223
Lasseter, John, 322
The Last Emperor, 109
The Last Laugh, 48
The Last Wave, 341, 341f
Last Year at Marienbad, 189–190, 190f, 318, 318f
Latin Americans, 51, 399, 399f

Lau, Andrew, 363
Laura, 211, 212, 213f
L'Avventura, 175, 403f
Lawrence, Florence, 9, 46
Lawrence, Jennifer, 103, 243
Lawrence of Arabia, 22, 87, 123, 123f
Le Chinoise, 266
Le Million, 202
Le Quattro Volte (The Four Times), 264, 264f
Le région centrale, 314, 314f
lead room, 132
leading actors, 102–103. *See also* stars
Leave No Trace, 179, 180f
Leaving Jerusalem by Railway, 291, 291f
Ledger, Heath, 397
Lee, Ang, 8, 251, 251f, 258
Lee, Spike, 64–65, 100–101, 100f, 101f, 247, 294, 294f, 397–398, 398f
Lee Daniels' The Butler, 73, 95–96, 96f, 264
The Left-Handed Gun, 350
Legally Blonde, 94
Léger, Fernand, 307, 307f
Legrand, Michel, 201
leisure time, 35, 234
Lemon, 325
Lemonade, 65, 73, 316, 395
Leone, Sergio, 149
Letter to Jane, 328, 328f

letterbox format, 131
Letters from Iwo Jima, 412, 412f
Leviathan, 299, 299f
Lévi-Strauss, Claude, 387
Levy, Hank, 217
Ley, Len, 317
LGBT film, 47, 66, 72, 313–314
L'Herbier, Marcel, 49
Library of Congress Motion Picture Conservation Center, 79
Life Is Beautiful, 245–246, 246f
Life of an American Fireman, 155, 239, 240f
Life of Pi, 105f, 251, 251f
lighting, 96–99, 101, 101f, 105, 105f
Liman, Doug, 237
Lime Kiln Club Field Day, 329
The Limey, 177–178, 178f
limited release, 16
Lincoln, 241, 242f, 248–249
Lincoln, Abraham, 242
Lincoln Motion Picture Company, 45
Lindsay, Vachel, 379, 410
line producer, 8
linear chronology, 250–251, 265
linguistics, 386–387
Linklater, Richard, 323, 323f
The Lion King, 323
Listen to Britain, 293
Little Big Man, 145, 232

The Little Mermaid, 315, 357, 357f
Little Miss Sunshine, 205, 205f, 250
Little Nemo, 324f
"Little Three" studios, 50
Little Women, 126, 126f, 372
live-action movies, 309
The Lives of Others, 74
Living Playing Cards, 162, 163f
Livingston, Jennie, 294
Llosa, Claudia, 74
Lloyd, Harold, 131
Loach, Ken, 58
local genres, 368–369
location scouts, 10
Lone Fisherman, 240
The Lonedale Operator, 45
The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner, 57
The Lonely Villa, 156
long shot (LS), 133, 133f
long takes, 179
Looking for Langston, 223
Looney Tunes series, 309
looping, 208
Lord, Phil, 330
The Lord of the Rings, 96, 96f, 143
Lorentz, Pare, 293
Lost, Lost, Lost, 297

Lost in Translation, 256, 256f
Louisiana Story, 109
Love Crimes, 364
low angles, 135, 135f
low-key lighting, 97, 98f
Lubezki, Emmanuel "Chivo," 117, 125, 128
Lubitsche, Ernst, 348
Lucas, George, 63, 124, 219, 388f
Lucía, 399, 399f
Lullaby of Broadway, 341
Lumière, August and Louis, 44, 89, 120, 183, 276, 378f
Lumière and Company, 183f
Lupino, Ida, 54
Luxo Jr., 322
Luzbecki, Emmanuel, 257
Lynch, David, 64, 183f
lyrical styles, 326, 326f

M

M, 47, 211, 211f
machinima, 316
Mackenzie, David, 422
Macpherson, Kenneth, 307
Mad Max: Fury Road, 128
Madagascar, 323
Madame X: An Absolute Ruler, 219, 219f
Mädchen in Uniform, 51–52, 52f
Madonna, 397
magic lantern, 119
The Magicians of Wanzerbe, 296
The Magnificent Ambersons, 15, 205
Magnificent Obsession, 353
The Magnificent Seven, 349
Magnolia, 63
Magritte, René, 387
Mak, Alan, 363
make-up, 94–96, 100
Makhmalbaf, Mohsen and Samira, 70
Making Waves: The Art of Cinematic Sound, 200f
Malcolm X, 65, 343, 343f
Malick, Terrence, 138, 222, 417
The Maltese Falcon, 363–364
Malthus, Thomas, 276
“mammy” stereotype, 246–247, 246f

Man on Wire, 282, 282f
The Man Who Fell to Earth, 367
The Man Who Knew Too Much, 235
The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance, 349
Man with a Movie Camera, 48, 48f, 158, 277, 293, 307, 325
Mancini, Henry, 217
Manet, E˙douard, 327
manga, 315
Manhatta, 307
manipulative narration, 260
Mankiewicz, Herman, 385
Manovich, Lev, 305
Manson, Charlie, 148
Manufacturing Dissent: Uncovering Michael Moore, 293, 297
Mao Zedong, 68
Marclay, Christian, 320
Marey, Étienne-Jules, 120
Maria Candelaria, 52
Marie Antoinette, 106
Marker, Chris, 57, 296, 314, 321
marketing and promotion, 23–32
    advertising, 28–31
    changing technologies in, 30, 30f
    definition of, 23
    interest, generating, 23–28
The Marriage of Marla Braun, 66, 66f
Martel, Lucrecia, 219, 219f
The Martian, 85

Martin, Darnell, 65
Marvel Cinematic Universe, 71, 95, 95f, 237, 330, 340
Marxism, 388–389
Masaoka, Kenzō, 309
masks, 131, 131f
"The Mass Ornament" (Kracauer), 383
The Master, 139, 139f
master shot, 127
match on action, 170, 172f, 173f
maternal melodramas, 393, 393f
The Matrix, 143, 403–404, 404f
matte shot, 143
Mayer, Louis B., 8
Maysles, Albert, 292
McCabe and Mrs. Miller, 339, 339f
McCarthy, Joseph, 53
McCarthy, Melissa, 347
McCay, Windsor, 306, 324, 324f
McDaniel, Hattie, 51
McKinley, William, 276, 276f
McKinnon, Kate, 134
McLaren, Norman, 309
McNamara, Robert, 288
McQueen, Steve, 31, 73, 354
mechanical effects, 142
media convergence, 29, 71
Media History Digital Library, 427
medium close-up, 134, 134f

medium long shot, 134–135, 134f
medium shot, 134–135, 134f
medium specificity, 377
Meek's Cutoff, 351, 351f
Meet the Parents, 246
Meeting of Two Queens, 191
megaplexes, 33
Mekas, Jonas, 297, 309, 327
Melancholia, 74, 179
Méliès, George, 48, 88, 142, 155, 156f, 162, 306, 317, 342, 342f
Melnyk, Debbie, 297
melodrama, 196–197, 338, 351–354, 352f, 365, 365f
Memento, 177, 239
Memories of Underdevelopment, 62, 62f, 315, 315f
memory, shaping, 264
Men, 67
Men in Black: International, 337
Menken, Marie, 327
Menzel, Idina, 397
Menzie, William Cameron, 89
Mercury, Freddie, 153
Merrie Melodies series, 309
Meshes of the Afternoon, 123, 308, 310–311, 310f, 311f
messages, 387
metaphorical props, 93
Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer (MGM), 8
Metropolis, 47, 48, 89, 104, 121, 336, 342, 342f
metter-en-scène, 385

Metz, Christian, 205, 390, 391, 402
Mexican cinema, 52
Meyers, Nancy, 72
MGM, 339
Mi Vida Loca (My Crazy Life), 65
Micheaux, Oscar, 45, 49, 77, 78
mickey-mousing, 215
Midnight Cowboy, 146–147, 147f
midnight movies, 367
A Midsummer Night's Dream, 309, 309f
Midway, 111
Miike, Takashi, 58
Milani, Tahmineh, 70
Mildred Pierce, 92, 212–213, 248, 268–269, 268f
Milestone Films, 24
Milk, 241, 242f
Milk, Harvey, 241–242, 294
The Milk of Sorrow, 74, 74f
Miller, Arthur, 70
Miller, Chris, 330
Miller, Rebecca, 125
mimesis, 382
Mineo, Sal, 395, 395f
Minh-ha, Trinh T., 223, 288, 328
Minions, 26
minor characters, 244
Minority Report, 418–420, 419f, 420f, 433
minstrel shows, 198

Miramax, 65
Mirren, Helen, 103
mise-en-scène, 85–113, 219, 422f
Do the Right Thing, 100–101
elements of, 90–106
as an external condition, 106–107
history of, 87–90
as a measure of character, 107–108
in melodramas, 352
primary traditions for, 108–113
Les Misérables, 57, 356, 356f
Mishima, 410
Mishima, Yukio, 410
Miss Pettigrew Lives for a Day, 348
Mitchell, John Cameron, 303
mix, 209
Miyazaki, Hayao, 315, 326
Mizoguchi, Kenji, 58
MLA Handbook, 434
Moana, 210, 210f
Moana (1926), 274, 277
mobile frame, 129, 129f
Mobile Suit Gundam, 331
mockumentaries, 297–298, 298f
Modern Language Association (MLA), 424, 434–435
modernity, 305–306, 382
Moffatt, Tracey, 329
Moi un noir (I, a Black), 278

Mon Ciné, 380f
Monet, Claude, 306, 306f
Money Monster, 103–104
The Monk, 357
Monroe, Marilyn, 86
Monsoon Wedding, 76, 399
Monsters, Inc., 312
Monsters University, 21
montage, 156, 159f, 190, 191, 191f, 254, 382–383
Montaigne, Michel de, 276
Montez, Mario, 312
Monty Python and the Holy Grail, 347
Monty Python's The Meaning of Life, 347
Moonlight, 97, 97f, 215, 215f
Moore, Michael, 287, 287f, 292–293, 297
Moreno, Mario, 52
Morin, Edgar, 299
Morita, Pat, 247
Morocco, 394, 394f
Morricone, Ennio, 204
Morris, Errol, 288, 290, 290f, 297, 297f
Morrison, Bill, 320
Morrison, Rachel, 126
Morton, Matt, 274
Mosley, Walter, 359
Mother, 381, 381f
Mother India, 59, 60–61, 60f, 61f

Mothersbaugh, Mark, 215
Mothlight, 309
Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA), 29–31, 53
Motion Picture Herald, 198f
Motion Picture Patents Company, 44
Motion Picture Producers and Distributors Association (MPDAA), 50, 236
Motion Picture Production Code, 50
motion studies, 120f
motion-capture technology, 13
movement, 140–142, 140f
movement image, 402
A Movie, 191
Movie, 384
movie palaces, 33, 34
Movietone sound system, 198, 203, 203f
Moving Image Research Center, 427
Mozzhukhin, Ivan, 184
Mr. and Mrs. Smith, 27
Mrs. Dalloway, 57
MTV television channel, 316
Mudbound, 126, 127f
Mulholland Drive, 243, 243f
multimedia artists, 321–322
multimedia plane, 322
multiple narrations, 260–261, 261f
Multiple Orgasm, 313
multiplex, 33

Mulvey, Laura, 314, 392, 392f, 393, 394f
Muniz, Vik, 293
Münsterberg, Hugo, 379, 391
Murch, Walter, 200
Murnau, F. W., 47–48, 137, 203, 274, 274f, 366, 368f
Murphy, Dudley, 307
Murray, Bill, 346
Murrow, Edward R., 279
music in film, 213–218, 214f, 223, 308–309
music supervisor, 217
musicals, 214, 354–357, 354f, 355f
Mussolini, Benito, 89
Mutesi, Phiona, 241
Muybridge, Eadweard, 120f, 324
My Beautiful Laundrette, 348, 348f, 422–424, 422f
My Brother's Wedding, 25
My Country, My People, 261
My Darling Clementine, 53, 341f, 349
My Fair Lady, 94, 95f, 248, 356
My Father's Camera, 296
Mystery Train, 256, 256f
Mystifying Movies (Carroll), 402
myths, 341, 343, 343f

N

Nagra magnetic recording system, 299
Nair, Mira, 22, 72, 76
Naked City, 89
The Namesake, 172f
Nance, Terence, 318
Nanook of the North, 277, 281, 287–288, 287f, 295, 296, 297
Napolèon, 17, 49, 77, 94–95, 129
Narboni, Jean, 389
narration, 256, 258
narrative, 7, 232
narrative analysis, 417
narrative constructions, 63
narrative cueing, 215
narrative duration, 178, 254
narrative films, 231–269
    elements of, 239–261
    gender and, 262–263
    history of, 232–238
    memory and history, 264
    traditions of, 264–269
narrative frames, 258
narrative frequency, 177, 254
narrative music, 214–217
narrative pattern of time, 250–254
narrative perspectives, 256–261
narrative reflexivity, 237

narrative space, 254–256, 352
narrative traditions, 264–269
narratology, 387–388, 388f
narrator, 211, 258
narrowcasting, 66
Nashville, 208, 210, 210f
National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH), 275
National Film Board of Canada, 278, 309
National Film Registry, 42
National Velvet, 245
Native Americans, 348–349, 350, 350f
native aspect ratio, 131
natural lighting, 97
naturalistic lighting, 105
naturalistic tradition, 108–109, 109f, 111, 112–113, 112f
Nauman, Bruce, 320
Nebraska, 366
Neon Genesis Evangellon, 331
neorealism, Italian, 56
Nerdwriter, 405
Nervous System, 321
Neshat, Shirin, 321, 321f
Netflix, 20
Nevins, Sheila, 279
New American Cinema, 55
New German Cinema, 66–67, 236
New Hollywood and blockbuster era, 62–63, 339–340
New Hollywood cinema, 236

New Jack City, 363
new media, 304, 305
New Queer Cinema, 66
New Wave cinemas, 56–58
Newman, Paul, 349, 349f
News from Home, 213, 213f
Niagara Falls, 120, 120f
Nicholson, Jack, 343f
nickelodeons, 33, 44, 197f
Nico, 313f
Nielsen, Asta, 382f
Niépce, Joseph Nicéphore, 119
Night and Fog, 288, 289f
Night Cries: A Rural Tragedy, 329
Night Mail, 211
The Night of the Hunter, 77, 77f, 131, 131f
Night of the Living Dead, 110, 358
The Nightmare Before Christmas, 356
Nightmare on Elm Street, 17
9 to 5, 255, 255f
Ninotchka, 203f
nitrate film base, 121
No Country for Old Men, 351
Nolan, Christopher, 23, 63, 126, 203, 239
Nollywood, 76
nondiegetic elements of narrative films, 248–250
nondiegetic inserts, 249

nondiegetic sound, 204–205
nonfiction films, 280–282, 284–285
nonlinear editing, 161
non-narrative films, 281, 281f, 284–285
Norman, Floyd, 312, 312f
Normand, Mabel, 347
North by Northwest, 143f
Nosferatu, 48, 137, 137f, 366, 366f, 368, 368f
Nosferatu the Vampyre, 368, 368f
note taking, 415–416
The Notebook, 166
Notes on Cinematography (Bresson), 223
Notorious, 94
Nouvelle Vague. *See* French New Wave
Now, Voyager, 223, 393
Nyman, Michael, 195

O

O Brother, Where Art Thou?, 111, 126, 413–414, 413f, 414f
objective point of view, 128
objectivity, 411–412
Ocean's Eleven, 253
October, 255
The Odyssey (Homer), 232, 233f
Of Great Events and Ordinary People, 281
offscreen sound. *See* asynchronous sound
offscreen space, 132, 132f
Olympia, 170, 171f
Olympia (Manet), 327
Om Shanti Om, 75
omniscient narration, 259, 265
On the Stage; or, Melodrama from the Bowery, 87
On the Waterfront, 217
Once Upon a Time … in Hollywood, 127, 148–149, 148f, 149f, 351
Once Upon a Time in the West, 149
180-degree rule, 169f, 1668
online distribution, 20–21
Only Lovers Left Alive, 10f
Ono, Yoko, 313
onscreen sound. *See* synchronous sound
onscreen space, 132
ontology, 377
Ophüls, Max, 140, 414

oppositional gaze, 396
optical effects, 142
optical sound recording, 277, 299
The Orchid Thief (Orleans), 409
Ordinary People, 353
Osborne, John, 57
Oshima, Nagisa, 31, 58
Ossessione, 56
Otomo, Katsuhiro, 315
Ottinger, Ulrike, 219, 219f
Ottman, John, 153
Ouedraogo, Idrissa, 68
outline, 422–423
Outrage, 58
overhead shot, 135, 136f
overlapping dialogue, 210, 210f
overlapping editing, 178–179, 179f
An Oversimplification of Her Beauty, 318, 319f
over-the-shoulder shots, 166
Ovitz, Michael, 10
Oxford Bibliographies Online, 427
Oz the Great and Powerful, 231
Ozu, Yasujiro, 58, 135, 174, 417

P

Pabst, G. W., 47
pace, 179–181, 180f
Pacific Rim, 367
Pacino, Al, 363f
package-unit approach, 10
Paik, Nam June, 316, 321
Pain and Glory, 251–252, 252f
paintings, 306
Pan-African Film and Television Festival of Ouagadougou (FESPACO), 76
Panahi, Jafar, 70
pan-and-scan process, 131
panchromatic shock, 121
Panofsky, Erwin, 380
Panoramic View of Niagara Falls in Winter, 338
pans, 140
Pan's Labyrinth, 11, 90, 90f, 145, 146f
Paprika, 325
Parallel Cinema, 59
parallel editing, 156, 157f
parallel plots, 253
parallel sound, 202, 204
parallelism, 204
Paramount, 339
Paranormal Activity, 16
paraphrasing, 433–434

Parasite, 75, 75f, 228
Paravel, Verena, 299
Pariah, 96, 138, 138f
Paris, je t'aime, 261
Paris, Texas, 140
Paris Is Burning, 294, 294f
Park, Nick, 322
Park Chan-wook, 75
Parker, Nate, 73
Parks, Gordon, 55
Paronnaud, Vincent, 70, 316
participatory experiences, 321–322, 321f, 394–395, 395f
The Passion of Joan of Arc, 49, 49f, 174, 176f
pastiche, 403
Pater, Walter, 305–306
Paterson, 410, 410f
Paterson (Williams), 410
Pather Panchali, 59, 267, 267f
The Patriot (1979), 314
Patton, 343, 343f
Paul, Robert W., 44
Pawlikowsky, Pawel, 130–131
The Peanuts Movie, 31
Pearl Harbor, 21
Peck, Gregory, 216f
Peck, Raul, 211
Peele, Jordan, 182, 184f, 335, 358

Peirce, C. S., 387, 402
Peirce, Kimberly, 66, 351
Penguins, 280, 280f
Penn, Arthur, 28, 55, 160, 186
Pennies from Heaven, 356
People's Republic of China, 68–69. *See also* Chinese cinema
perception, expansion of, 325
performance, 99–104, 102f
performance-capture technology, 143–144, 144f
Perfumed Nightmare, 315
periodization, 42–43
Perry, Tyler, 73
Persepolis, 70, 70f, 316
Persona, 118
personal documentaries, 297–298, 297f
personal opinion, and objectivity, 411–412
Personal Velocity, 125
persuasive positions, 288–290, 289f, 290f
Petit, Phillippe, 282
phantasmagoria, 119
Phantom Thread, 170, 170f
phenakistoscope, 119
phenomenology, 402
The Philadelphia Story, 348, 415
philosophy, and film, 402–403
Phoenix, Joaquin, 396, 396f
phonograph, 197, 203
photogénie, 379

photography, inventions of, 119–120
photojournalism, 276
The Photoplay (Münsterberg), 379
Photoplay magazine, 30, 30f
photorealism, 323
physical horror films, 359, 359f
physical melodrama, 352–353, 353f
Pi, 99
The Piano, 135, 135f, 136f, 195
Pickford, Mary, 46, 240
Pickpocket, 223
Pink Flamingos, 367
Pinocchio, 357
piracy, 19
The Pirates of the Caribbean series, 104, 237
Pitt, Brad, 27, 95, 148, 148f
Pixar, 17, 125
Pixar Studios, 322, 323
pixilation, 322
PK, 76, 76f
Plainview, Daniel, 215
Plan 9 from Outer Space, 188f, 367
platforming, 16
Plato, 119, 303
Playtime, 201, 201f
Pleasantville, 137–138
plot chronologies, 251–253, 252f
plot time, 175

plots, 239
The Plow That Broke the Plains, 211
Poe, Edgar Allan, 261, 379
poetic realism, 52
Poetics (Aristotle), 337
point of view, 128, 128f
point-of-view (POV) shots, 135–136, 172–174, 173f
Poitier, Sidney, 24, 53
Police Academy, 347
political documentaries, 293–294, 294f
Polley, Sarah, 284–285
Pollyanna, 240
Polo, Marco, 275
Polyester, 384f
Pontecorvo, Gillo, 59
pop music, 217–218
Porky's, 347
Portapak video equipment, 278, 316
Porter, Edwin S., 45, 88, 155, 234, 234f, 239, 250
Portman, Natalie, 365
Portman, Rachel, 216
Portrait of Jason, 313
Positif, 384
Posse, 351
The Post, 103f
post-classical narrative, 265–266, 266f
postmodernism, 403–404, 404f
postproduction, 8, 13–14

postproduction sound, 208
poststructuralism, 389–391
postsynchronous sound, 219, 219f
postwar cinemas, 53–62
genres, 339
international art cinema, 55–62
postwar Hollywood, 53–55
Potter, Sally, 58, 314
Powell, Eleanor, 223, 223f
practical effects, 142
Precious: Based on the Novel 'Push' by Sapphire, 73
premiere, 16
Preminger, Otto, 200f
preproduction, 7–11
prerecorded music, 217
prescriptive approaches, 365–366
presence, image as, 146–147
Pride and Prejudice, 236
The Priest from Kirchfeld, 369
Prieto, Rodrigo, 138
Primary, 279, 279f
primary research sources, 425–426
Prince, Stephen, 436
Prince-Bythewood, Gina, 72
principal photography, 11
print media, 30
process shot, 143
producers, 7–8

production, 6–13
cast, 12–13
cinematographer, 12–13
director, 11–12
preproduction, 7–11
Production Code, 236
Production Code Administration, 50, 53, 348
production designer, 10, 89
production sound mixer, 12, 208
production values, 8
productive time, 35, 38
progressive development, in character development, 248
"progressive texts," 389
Prometheus, 28
promotion, 23. *See also* Marketing and promotion
proofreading essays, 424
propaganda films, 277–278, 278f, 293
The Proposal, 347, 347f
Propp, Vladimir, 387
props, 92–94, 100–101, 101f
prosthetics, 95
protagonists, 244
Psycho, 53, 93, 93f, 94, 164, 165f, 180, 196, 359
psychoanalysis, 390, 392
psychological horror films, 359
psychological location, 255–256
The Public Enemy, 245, 363
Pudovkin, Vsevolod, 156, 381, 381f

pulled focus, 136–137
Pulp Fiction, 63, 64, 64f
Pursuits of Happiness (Cavell), 386
Pussy Riot: A Punk Prayer, 289
Pygmalion, 94, 248

Q

Quay, Stephen, 324, 326–327
Quay, Tiomothy, 324, 326–327
The Queen, 280
Queen Elizabeth, 88
Queen of Katwe, 241, 242f
queer film theory, 393–394
A Quiet Place, 224–225, 224f, 225f
Quo Vadis? 56
quotations, direct, 433–434

R

race, in film theory, 397–399
race and ethnicity, 51, 53–54
race movies, 45, 49
rack focus, 136–137
Radio City Music Hall, 36
Radio Corporation of America, 199
Raiders of the Lost Ark series, 63, 215, 237, 247
Raimi, Sam, 231
Rain, 282–283, 283f
Rainer, Yvonne, 313
Raise the Red Lantern, 68, 68f
Ran, 369, 369f
Rapace, Noomi, 28
Rape, 313
Rapture, 321, 321f
Rashomon, 58, 266, 266f, 428–431, 430f, 431f
Rat Life and Diet in North America, 314
rating systems, 29–31, 53
Ray, Nicholas, 54, 158–159
Ray, Satyajit, 59, 267, 267f
Ray Gun Virus, 304
RBG, 286, 286f
reactions shots, 174, 174f
readers, identifying, for film essays, 412–413
Ready Player One, 238, 238f
realism, 89, 91, 158, 160, 186, 210, 211, 240, 380, 382–383

rear projection, 143, 143f
Rear Window, 136, 164, 247, 392
Rebel Without a Cause, 54, 54f, 130, 130f, 395, 395f
reception, 32
reception theory, 394–396, 395f
recording sales, 217
Red Harvest, 359
Red River, 134f
Red Scare, 53
The Red Shoes, 93, 138
The Red Violin, 93–94, 94f
Redford, Robert, 349, 349f
Reds, 42
reenactments, 297, 297f
Rees, Dee, 126
reestablishing shots, 166, 167f
referent, 387
referentiality, 403f, 404
reflected sound, 208
reflexive documentary histories, 295, 296f
reflexive narration, 260
reframing, 140
regressive development, in character development, 248
Reichardt, Kelly, 351
Reiniger, Lotte, 307, 307f
Reitz, Edgar, 66–67, 369
Reitzell, Brian, 217
release strategies, 16–17

religious films, 344, 344f
The Renaissance, 305–306
Renoir, Jean, 52, 267, 267f
Repo Man, 367
representation, 397–399
The Republic (Plato), 119
rerecording, 209
research, for film essays, 425–435
Resnais, Alain, 57, 177, 189–190, 288, 318
restricted narration, 259, 260f, 265
The Return of the King, 96
The Revenant, 87, 128, 257, 257f, 349
Revere the Emperor, 369
revising essays, 424
revisionist genre traditions, 366–368
revisionist westerns, 351, 351f
Reznor, Trent, 216
rhetorical positions, 286–290
Rhizome, 327
rhythm, 181
rhythmic editing, 181
Rhythmus 21, 306f
Richards, Keith, 104
Richardson, Dorothy, 410
Richardson, Robert, 148
Richter, Hans, 306, 306f, 379
Riddles of the Sphinx, 314, 392, 392f
"Ride of the Valkyries" (Wagner), 214

The Rider, 350, 350f
Ridley, Daisy, 243
Riefenstahl, Leni, 170, 171f, 278, 289
Riggs, Marlon, 316, 316f
Riis, Jacob, 276, 276f
Rio, Dolores del, 52
Rise of the Planet of the Apes, 144
The River, 267, 267f, 293
Rivette, Jacques, 384
RKO Radio Pictures, 199, 339
Road to Perdition, 363
Robbie, Margot, 217f
Roberts, Ètienne-Gaspard, 119
Roberts, Julia, 104
Roberts, William L., 338f
Robeson, Eslanda, 307
Robeson, Paul, 49, 307, 307f
Robinson Crusoe, 234
Robinson Crusoe on Mars, 256
Rocha, Glauber, 58
Rock of Ages, 341
Rocket Man, 181, 181f
Rockwell, Norman, 144
Rocky Balboa, 221, 221f
The Rocky Horror Picture Show, 345, 345f, 395, 395f
Rodriguez, Robert, 125
Roeg, Nicolas, 177
Rohmer, Eric, 384

Roma, 117
Roman Holiday, 255, 255f
romantic comedies, 72, 348, 348f
"rom-com." *See* romantic comedies
Rome, Open City, 56, 56f, 105
Romero, George, 110
Ronin, 94
The Room, 34, 34f
Room, 87, 87f
room tone, 208
Roosevelt, Theodore, 276
Rose Hobart, 308
Ross, Atticus, 216
Ross, Matt, 353
Rossellini, Roberto, 56, 383f, 402
Rossetti, Dante Gabriel, 306
rotoscoping, 323
Rouch, Jean, 278–279, 296, 299
Rough Sea at Dover, 276
Rowling, J. K., 237
The Royal Tanenbaums, 215
Ruiz, Raoul, 281
rule of thirds, 132
The Rules of the Game, 52, 52f
Rumsfeld, Donald, 290, 290f
Run Lola Run, 67, 253, 253f
Russian Ark, 161, 161f, 264

Russian formalists, 388
Ruttmann, Walter, 307
Ruzowitzky, Stefan, 369
Rydstrom, Gary, 200f

S

Saboteur, 185, 185f
safety film, 121
Safety Last, 135f
Sagan, Leontine, 52
Salaam Bombay! 22
The Salesman, 70
Salt of the Earth, 238, 238f
San Francisco, 191, 191f
Sanders-Brahms, Helma, 183f
Sans soleil (Sunless), 296
Sarris, Andrew, 384, 385
Satrapi, Marjane, 70, 316
Saturation booking, 16
Saturday Afternoon, 346, 346f
Saturday Night Fever, 223
Saussure, Ferdinand de, 386–387, 402
Saving Private Ryan, 118, 119f
Saw, 359
scale, 132
A Scanner Darkly, 323, 323f
Scarface (1932 and 1983), 363, 363f
The Scarlet Empress, 42
scenes, 182
scenic realism, 91–92, 94–95
scenics, 276–277

Schamus, James, 8
Schatz, Thomas, 386
Schepisi, Fred, 367
Schindler's List, 38
Schlöndorff, Volker, 248f, 369
Schmiechen, Richard, 294
Schneemann, Carolee, 313
Schoedsack, Ernest B., 296
scholarly books and journals, 425
School of Rock, 179
Schüfftan, Eugen, 342
Schüfftan effect, 342
Schulz, Bruno, 327
Schumer, Amy, 251f
Schwarzenegger, Arnold, 103
science fiction genre, 342, 342f, 343, 344, 344f, 367
score, 214
Scorsese, Martin, 23, 43, 77, 90, 131, 245, 256, 266, 363
Scott, Ridley, 22, 28, 64, 85, 222, 357
Scott, Tony, 160–161
Scream, 360
Screen, 384, 391, 392
screen theory, 391
screen time, 175–176
Screening Violence (Prince), 436
screenplays, 7, 234–235
screens, diversification of in digital era, 72–74
screenwriters, 7, 234–235

screwball comedies, 347–348
script doctor, 7
scriptwriters. *See* screenwriters
Se7en, 249–250, 250f, 316
The Searchers, 42, 53–54, 54f, 221, 266, 349
The Seashell and the Clergyman, 49, 147, 147f, 326
Sec, Milica, 318–319
Second Life, 321
secondary characters, 244
secondary research sources, 426–427, 433
The Secret of Kells, 323, 323f, 324
Secretariat, 254
segmentation, 182
Seidelman, Susan, 64–65
selects, 12
Selick, Henry, 322, 322f
Selma, 42, 43f, 73
Selznick, David O., 8, 89
Sembène, Ousmane, 67–68, 89, 261, 315, 434
semidiegetic sound, 205
semiology, 386–387
semiotics, 386–389
Sennett, Mack, 346, 347
Senses of Cinema, 405
sequels, 71, 340, 340f
sequence shots, 179, 180
sequences, 182
Serene Velocity, 321

Serkis, Andy, 144
set decorators, 10
set design, 106
set designers, 88–89
set lighting, 97
sets, 90
settings, 90
Seven Samurai, 134
7 Up, 283
The Seventh Seal, 54
70 mm film, 121, 121f
sex, lies, and videotape, 24, 65
sexuality, 96, 391–394. *See also* gender
Seyrig, Delphine, 190f
shading, 99
Shaft, 17, 55
shallow focus, 136
The Shallows, 21, 21f
Shambu, Girish, 405
Shame, 31
Shane, 133, 133f, 350
Shanghai Express, 102
Sharits, Paul, 304
The Shawshank Redemption, 417
Sheeler, Charles, 307
sheet music, 217
The Sheik, 88f, 246
Shelley, Percy Bysshe, 305

Sherlock, Jr., 375
Sherlock Holms, 90
She's Gotta Have It, 64–65
The Shining, 124, 215, 215f, 341, 343, 343f
Shoah, 295
shock cut, 164, 164f
Shohat, Ella, 398
Sholay, 59
shooting ratio, 279
The Shop Around the Corner, 348
The Shop on Main Street, 135
Shoplifters, 58, 58f
Shopsowitz, Karen, 296
Shortly After Marriage (Hogarth), 337f
shot/reverse shots, 169–170, 170f, 174
shots, 127, 128–136
Shrek, 316
Shub, Esfir, 158, 191, 277
Sicko, 292–293
Side by Side, 125
sidelighting, 97
Siegel, Don, 426
Sight and Sound, 426
sign, 387
signified, 387
signifier, 387
The Silence of the Lambs, 244, 359

The Silences of the Palace, 67
silent cinema period, 44–49, 196, 197–198
animation and experimental media, 306–307
early cinema, 44–45
film preservation and, 77
French cinema, 48–49
German expressionist cinema, 47–48
silent features in Hollywood, 46–47
Soviet silent films, 48
star system and, 88–89
Silk Stockings, 110, 203, 203f
Silly Symphonies, 139
Silver Linings Playbook, 26–27
Silverstone, Alicia, 400
Simba, 277, 277f
Simmonds, Millicent, 225
The Simpsons, 337
simulacrum, 403–404
Sin City, 364
Sing Street, 356
Singin' in the Rain, 42, 92, 92f, 206–207, 206f, 207f, 388
The Singing Detective, 19
Sirk, Douglas, 41, 353, 365, 389, 389f
Sissako, Abderrahmane, 68
Sitney, P. Adams, 308
16 mm film, 121, 121f
Sixth Generation, 69
The Sixth Sense, 90, 358

63 Up, 283
slapstick comedy, 46, 347, 347f
slasher films, 359, 359f
Sleep, 312
Sleeping Beauty, 309, 312
Sleepless in Seattle, 72
slow cinema, 179–180, 405, 405f
slow motion, 142, 281
Slumdog Millionaire, 76, 125
Small Town Girl, 348
Smith, Harry, 308, 319, 319f
Smith, Jack, 312–313, 313f
Smith, Kevin, 9
Smoke Signals, 65
The Smurfs, 312
Snakes on a Plane, 32
Snow, Michael, 314, 314f, 320–321
Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs, 139, 322, 324, 356
Sobchack, Vivian, 402
social blocking, 101, 104, 104f
social documentaries, 293–294
social hierarchies, 244–245
social media, 27, 31–32
social melodramas, 353–354, 354f
The Social Network, 209, 264, 265f
social realism, 58
Society for Cinema and Media Studies, 427
The Society of the Spectacle, 328

Soderbergh, Steven, 24, 65, 177–178
soft lighting, 97–99
Sokurov, Aleksandr, 161
Solanas, Fernando, 59, 293, 314–315
Solás, Humberto, 399, 399f
Solondz, Todd, 65
Some Like It Hot, 86
Son of the Sheik, 246
Sorkin, Aaron, 209
The Sorrow and the Pity, 414
Sorry We Missed You, 58
sound, 195–225
    authenticity and attention, 222–223
    in documentaries, 299
    elements of, 201–220
    history of, 196–200
    sound continuity and sound montage, 220–222
sound bridge, 208
sound continuity, 220, 221
sound designer, 208
sound editing, 13, 208
sound effects, 218–220
sound mixing, 13, 209
sound montage, 220, 221–222
The Sound of Music, 55, 200, 209, 354, 354f
sound perspective, 210
sound production, 208–209
sound recording, 208

sound reproduction, 209
soundstages, 89
soundtracks, 205, 214f, 249
source music, 205, 205f
sources, using and documenting, 433–435
South Korea, 75
Soviet documentaries, 277, 293
Soviet montage, 156–157, 381, 381f
Soviet silent films, 48
Spaceballs, 337, 337f
spaghetti westerns, 204
The Spanish Earth, 293
spatial continuity, 166, 175f, 176f
spatial unity, 168
special effects, 13, 63, 142–144, 147f, 342
spectatorship, 391, 395
Spellbound, 216, 216f
Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse, 330–331, 330f, 331f
Spielberg, Steven, 23, 62, 63, 63f, 89, 238, 248, 418
Spirited Away, 326
Spotlight, 412, 413f
spotting, 209
Spurlock, Morgan, 279, 279f
Spy, 347, 347f
Spy Kids, 125
Spy Kids 2: The Island of Lost Dreams, 125
Stagecoach, 51, 235, 349, 366, 367
Stahl, John, 353–354

Stam, Robert, 398
Stamp, Terence, 177–178, 178f
star studies, 396–397, 396f, 397f
star system, 26, 88–89
Star Trek Beyond, 340, 340f
Star Wars, 63, 124, 131, 339
Star Wars: Episode II — Attack of the Clones, 125
Star Wars: Episode IV — A New Hope, 388f
Star Wars: Episode VIII Star Wars: Episode VIII — The Last Jedi The Last Jedi, 14f
Star Wars sequel trilogy, 243
Star Wars series, 216, 237, 337, 340, 388
Star Wars: The Rise of Skywalker, 2
stars, 103–104, 103f
Steadicam, 124, 141–142, 142f
Steamboat Willie, 308, 308f, 324
Steenbeck editing table, 183, 183f
Steiner, Max, 199, 214, 223
Step Up 3D, 217
The Stepfather, 359
stereophonic sound, 200
stereotypes, 51, 246–247, 246f, 398f
Still Alice, 137, 137f
stingers, 215, 215f
Stone, Oliver, 239
stop-motion animation, 143f, 322, 322f, 324, 327
Stories We Tell, 284–285, 285f

story, definition of, 239
story time, 175
storyboards, 154, 155f
storytelling, 232
Strand, Paul, 307
Strauss, Johann, 184
Strayhorn, Billy, 200f
Streep, Meryl, 103f, 245, 245f, 421f
Street of Crocodiles, 326–327
A Streetcar Named Desire, 102, 102f, 352
Streisand, Barbara, 174f
Strike, 156, 320
Structural Anthropology (Lévi-Strauss), 387
structural film, 314
structural organizations, 320–321, 320f, 321f
structural paradigms, 366–367
structuralism, 386–389, 390
studio era, 214
Studio Ghibli, 315
studio systems, 8, 89, 157–159, 235, 338–339
Sturges, Preston, 111
stylistic analysis, 417
subgenres, 345
subjective documentaries, 297–298
subjective point of view, 128
subjective voiceover, 212f
The Sudden Wealth of the Poor People of Kombach, 369
Suicide Squad, 9, 217, 217f, 396

Sullivan, John S., 111
Sullivan's Travels, 111, 111f
Sunrise, 48
Sunrise: A Song of Two Humans, 203, 203f
Sunset Boulevard, 205, 258
Super 8 format, 124
Super Size Me, 279, 279f
superhero films, 71, 217, 237, 390f
Superman, 125
Superman the Movie, 30
supernatural horror films, 358, 358f
Support the Girls, 130f
supporting actors, 103
Surname Viet Given Name Nam, 223, 223f, 288, 328
surrealist cinema, 326–327
Suspicion, 92
Švankmajer, Jan, 322, 324
Svilova, Elizaveta, 158
Sweet Smell of Success, 97, 98f
Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song, 55, 55f
Symbiopsychotaxiplasm, 313, 313f
symbolic space, 256
symbols, 387
Symposium (Plato), 303
synchronized dialogue, 51
synchronous sound, 158, 198–199, 202–205, 223f, 299

T

T2 Trainspotting, 17
Tabu: A Story of the South Seas, 274, 274f
Tahimik, Kidlat, 315
Taiwan cinema, 69, 75
Tajima, Renee, 295
Takahata, Isao, 315
Take This Waltz, 284
takes, 12, 127
The Taking of Pelham 123, 107
talk shows, marketing and, 27
Tangerine, 71, 125, 126f
Tarantino, Quentin, 63, 64, 126, 127, 133, 142, 148–149, 180, 237
target audiences, 17
Tarnation, 16
Tarzan (1999), 315
Taste of Cherry, 70, 266
A Taste of Honey, 57
Tate, Sharon, 148
Tati, Jacques, 57, 201, 201f
Taupin, Bernie, 181f
Taxi, 70
Taxi Driver, 62, 105, 246, 266, 266f
Taylor, Elizabeth, 245
Taymor, Julie, 355
technical directors, 88–89
Technicolor, 122, 138, 139, 235

Technicolor Silly Symphony series, 309
technology, 30, 183, 200, 257. *See also specific technologies*
Technology/Transformation: Wonder Woman, 325, 325f
teen films, 368, 368f
telephoto lens, 122, 123
television documentaries, 279
temporality, 175–182
The Ten Commandments, 34, 46–47, 47f, 205
Teriyaki Boyz, 218
The Terminator, 103, 209, 213
Terminator 2: Judgment Day, 213
Terry, Ellen, 88
Testing the Limits, 279
The Texas Chain Saw Massacre, 359, 359f
textuality, image as, 147
Thalberg, Irving B., 8
The Spirit of TV, 294f
theaters, 16, 33
theatrical musicals, 355–356, 356f
theatrical release window, 23
theatrical tradition, 109–111, 110f
Their Finest, 7f
Thelma & Louise, 243–244
Theory of Film (Kracauer), 202, 378, 383
Theory of the Film (Balázs), 381
Theranos, 281
There Will Be Blood, 215, 351

These Three, 50
thesis statement, 421–422
They Are Lost to Vision Altogether, 329, 329f
They Shoot Horses, Don't They? 252
The Thief of Baghdad, 339
The Thin Blue Line, 297, 297f
The Thin Red Line, 417
Third Cinema, 59–62, 67, 314–315, 399
Third Eye Butterfly, 318, 318f
The Third Man, 105f, 129, 129f, 223
third-person narration, 259–260, 259f
Thirteen Days, 239
13th, 73
30-degree rule, 168–169
35 mm film, 121, 121f
Thirty-two Short Films About Glenn Gould, 283, 283f
This Is Spinal Tap, 298, 298f
Thomas, Wynn, 100
Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri, 417, 417f
Three Comrades, 235
360-degree pan, 140
3-D animation, 322
3-D technology, 27, 34, 35f, 127, 257, 257f, 330
three-point lighting, 97, 98f, 105
Thring, F. W., 208f
Thunderbolt: Magun, 76
THX 1138, 219

tie-ins, 26
tilts, 140
time, narrative pattern of, 250–254
time image, 402–403, 403f
Timecode, 183, 183f
time-lapse photography, 281
The Times of Harvey Milk, 294
timing, of exhibition, 35–38
The Tin Drum, 248, 248f
Titanic, 32f, 64, 258
Tlatli, Moufida, 67
To, Johnnie, 363
To Sleep with Anger, 24, 399
Tokyo Story, 58, 135f, 417
Toland, Gregg, 122, 136, 385
Tom Jones, 57
Tongues Untied, 316, 316f
Top Gun, 160–161
Top Hat, 110
top lighting, 97
topic selection, for film essays, 416–417, 421
topic sentences, 423–424
topicals, 277
Total Recall, 103
Touch of Evil, 53, 217, 364, 364f, 365, 432, 432f
Touzani, Maryam, 72
"Towards a Third Cinema" (Solanas and Getino), 59

Toy Story series, 18f, 63, 257, 312, 315, 322
tracking shots, 140–141
traditional animation, 322
trailers, 28–29
Trainwreck, 250, 251f
Trances, 77, 77f
Transformers, 71
Transformers: Age of Extinction, 161
transitions, 162–165
The Trapp Family, 369
Trask, Stephen, 303
travel films, 287–288
The Treachery of Images (Magritte), 387
treatment, 7
The Tree of Life, 222
Trier, Lars von, 74
Trip to the Moon, 155, 156f, 342
The Triplets of Belleville, 316, 356
Triumph of the Will, 278, 278f, 289
Trnka, Jirˇí, 309, 309f, 320
Troche, Rose, 66
Tron, 63
Truffaut, François, 57, 111, 384
Truth, Sojourner, 397f
Tsai Ming-liang, 75
Turbo, 21
Turing, Alan, 342

Turner, Guinevere, 66
Turner, Tina, 245
Turner Classic Movies, 24
12 Years a Slave, 73, 354, 354f
28 Days Later, 358, 358f
24-Hour Psycho, 317
Twister, 257
Two Evil Eyes, 261
Two or Three Things I Know About Her, 190
2001: A Space Odyssey, 106, 111, 172, 173f, 184–185, 211, 343
2-D animation, 322, 323, 323f
two-shots, 166
Tykwer, Tom, 67
Tyrus, 312

U

UbuWeb, 433
Ugetsu, 58
The Umbrellas of Cherbourg, 201
Un chien andalou (An Andalusian Dog), 326, 326f, 327
Uncle Tom's Cabin, 45, 88, 234, 234f
underground film, 312–314, 327
underlighting, 97, 98f
underscoring, 214
Underworld, 359, 362
Unforgiven, 350
unit production manager, 8
United States v. Paramount Pictures, Inc., 16, 53, 339
Universal Studios, 339
Universum Film AG (UFA), 47
The Unknown Known, 290, 290f
unreliable narration, 260
Unthinking Eurocentrism (Stam and Shohat), 398
Up, 139
Up series, 283
Us, 182, 184f, 228, 335
The Usual Suspects, 258

V

Vachon, Christine, 66
Valdez, Luis, 65
Valentino, Rudolph, 246
value, 138
values, in character coherence, 242
Vamonos con Pancho Villa! (Let's Go with Pancho Villa), 52
Les Vampires, 49
Van der Ryn, Ethan, 225
Van Peebles, Mario, 351
Van Peebles, Melvin, 55
The Vanishing Lady, 48
Varda, Agnès, 57, 57f, 236, 236f, 250, 283
Vasarhelyi, Elizabeth Chai, 273
vaudeville, 198
Vent d'est (Wind from the East), 57
verisimilitude, 165–166, 188, 205, 376, 376f
vertical montage, 221
Vertical Roll, 304, 305f
Vertigo, 42, 87, 140, 142, 143, 145, 392
Vertov, Dziga, 48, 156, 277, 293, 307, 308, 325, 381
VHS format, 19
video, 124
video art, 304
video essays, 405, 432
Video Fish, 321
video games, 237–238, 238f

video on demand (VOD), 14, 19–21, 23
video stores, 19–20
Vidor, Charles, 54
Vidor, King, 198, 198f
The Vietnam War, 19
viewing forums, 33
Vigo, Jean, 52, 221, 288
Vikander, Alicia, 342
Village Voice, 385
Vinterberg, Thomas, 74
viral marketing, 29
Viridiana, 344f
virtual reality (VR) filmmaking, 299
Visconti, Luchino, 56
The Visit, 164, 164f
visual effects (VFX), 13, 143–144
visual narrative, 232–233
"Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (Mulvey), 392, 394f
Vitalina Varela, 405f
Vitaphone, 198, 199f
Viva, 312
Vivre sa vie, 133f
voice, 102
voice in film, 209–213
"voice of God," 211, 286, 299
voice-off, 211–213
voiceovers, 205, 211–213, 212f, 213f, 222
Volver, 393, 393f

von Sternberg, Josef, 145
von Trier, Lars, 147, 192
Vorkapich, Slavko, 191

W

Wagner, Richard, 214
Waipai people, 294
Waking Life, 323
The Walk, 282, 282f
Walk the Line, 255, 396
Walker, Alice, 396
Walker, Paul, 218
walla, 208
Wall-E, 222, 222f
Walsh, Raoul, 385
Walt Disney Studios, 125, 308–309, 308f, 312, 315–316, 324, 326, 327f, 357
Waltz with Bashir, 323
Wang, Wayne, 65
The War, 295
War for the Planet of the Apes, 144f
War Horse, 216, 216f
Warhol, Andy, 312, 313f, 320
Warner Brothers, 198, 309, 339
Washington, Denzel, 425
Wasserman, Lew, 9–10
Waste Land, 293
Water Lilies (Monet), 306f
The Watermelon Woman, 298, 298f
Waters, John, 367, 384f
Wavelength, 320–321, 320f

Waxworks, 99
Way Down East, 197, 351–352, 352f
The Way We Were, 174f
Wayne, John, 54, 349, 397
Weber, Lois, 45
Weekend, 314, 314f
Wegener, Paul, 357
Weinstein Company, 16
Weir, Peter, 341
Welcome to the Dollhouse, 65
Welles, Orson, 15, 36–37, 53, 122, 199, 210, 217, 298, 364, 385
Wenders, Wim, 67, 140, 339
West Side Story, 355, 355f
Western Electric, 199, 203
westerns, 51, 53–54, 341f, 348–351, 348f, 368
Westworld, 125
Wet Hot American Summer, 16
Weta Digital, 143, 144
Whatever Happened to Baby Jane? 359
What's Love Got to Do with It? 245
The Wheel, 49
When the Levees Broke: A Requiem in Four Acts, 294, 294f
Where Are My Children? 45, 45f
Where to Invade Next, 287, 287f
Whiplash, 217
Whitaker, Forest, 95–96
White, Walter, 51

The White Balloon, 70
White Zombie, 358
Whitman, Walt, 249
Who Framed Roger Rabbit, 63
Who Killed Vincent Chin? 295, 296f
Why We Fight series, 288
Wicked, 231
wide release, 16
wide-angle lens, 122
widescreen processes, 123
widescreen ratios, 129–130
Widows, 244, 244f
Wieland, Joyce, 314
Wiene, Robert, 47, 260
The Wild Bunch, 351
Wilkie, David, 337
Williams, John, 216, 216f
Williams, William Carlos, 410
Willis, Bruce, 245
Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory, 111
Wilson, August, 425
Window Water Baby Moving, 309
Winfrey, Oprah, 73, 96, 96f
Wings of Desire, 67
Winsloe, Christa, 52
Winter's Bone, 109, 168, 245, 245f
wipe, 164

Within Our Gates, 49, 77, 78–79, 78f, 79f
The Wiz, 231
The Wizard of Oz, 122, 204, 204f, 231, 235, 236, 241, 241f
Wollen, Peter, 314, 392, 392f
Wollstonecraft, Mary, 276
The Woman in the Window, 48
women. *See also* gender
    characters for, 243
    as directors, 72, 73
    in early cinema, 45
    in editing, 158
    employment of, 51
    in German cinema, 51–52
    in independent filmmaking, 65–66
    in Iranian cinema, 70
    as screenwriters, 72
Women Film Pioneers Project, 433
women's pictures, 212–213
Wonder Woman series, 233f
The Wonderful Wizard of Oz (Baum), 231
Wong, Kar-wai, 75
Woo, John, 69, 179, 340
Wood, Edward D., Jr., 188f
Wood, Robin, 63
Woodlawn, Holly, 312
word of mouth advertising, 31–32
Words and Music, 217f

"The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility" (Benjamin), 327–328, 382
Workers Leaving the Lumière Factory, 44, 276
Working Girls, 77
Works Cited list, 433, 435
Works Progress Administration (WPA), 275
The World, 75
World Cinema Foundation, 77
The World of Apu, 267
writer's checklist, 424–425
written narratives, 232
Written on the Wind, 215, 353
Wuthering Heights, 236
WVLNT (or a Wavelength for Those Who Don't Have the Time), 321
Wyler, William, 95, 122, 136, 163f, 179, 385
Wyman, Jane, 41

X

Xala, 89, 261

Y

Yang, Edward, 69
Yasujiro Ozu, 75
Yellow Earth, 68
The Yellow Rolls-Royce, 93
Yesterday Girl, 66
Yi yi, 69
Yimou, Zhang, 138, 183f
You Can't Take It with You, 51
You Were Never Really Here, 396, 396f
Young, Bradford, 138
Young Frankenstein, 337, 367
Young Mr. Lincoln, 384
Youngblood, Gene, 321
YouTube, 321
You've Got Mail, 348

Z

Zajota and the Boogie Spirit, 399
Zavattini, Cesare, 56
Zelig, 261
Zentropa, 147
Zero Dark Thirty, 118, 119f
Zero for Conduct, 52
Zhang Yimou, 68
Zhang Yuan, 69
Zhao, Chloé, 350f
Zimmer, Hans, 203
zoetrope, 119
zombie films, 110, 110f
zoom lens, 122
zoom-in, 142
zooming, 123
zoom-out, 142
zooms, 142
Zoopraxiscope, 120
Zootopia, 33–34, 34f, 398
Zorns Lemma, 321, 321f
Zuckerberg, Mark, 264

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Exit Through the Gift Shop (2010)
Fantastic Mr. Fox (2009)
Ferris Bueller's Day Off (1986)
Hugo (2011)
In the Mood for Love (2000)
Man of Aran (1934)
Man of Steel (2013)
Moonlight (2016)
Moulin Rouge! (2001)
Persepolis (2007)
Pride and Prejudice and Zombies (2016)

Rear Window (1954)

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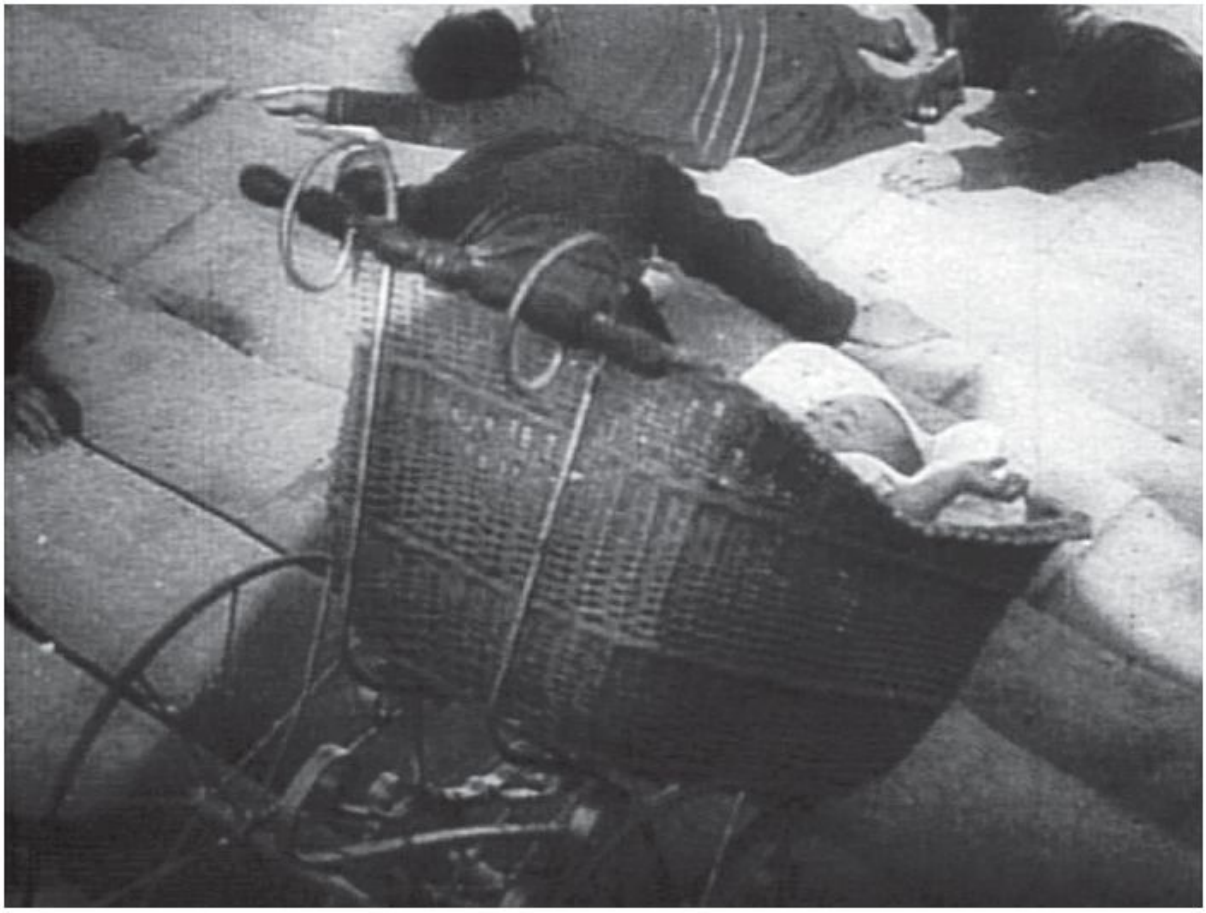

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FILM IN FOCUS: *Bicycle Thieves*

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VIEWING CUE: *Tangerine*
VIEWING CUE: *The General*
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VIEWING CUE: *Midnight Cowboy*
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